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# WITH A DUTCH ACCENT

*How a Hollander became an American*

by

DAVID CORNEL DEJONG

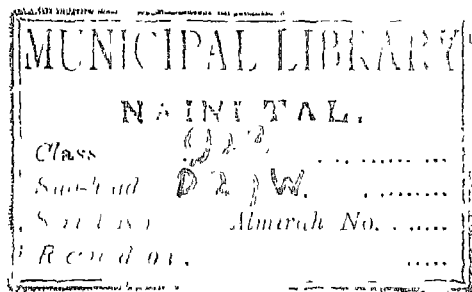
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*This book is respectfully dedicated to Elizabeth  
Nowell, who struggled so anxiously to make me a  
more articulate American, and to my brother  
Mick, who looked on.*



1708

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## PART ONE

*O Stunden in der Kindheit,  
da hinter den Figuren mehr als nur  
Vergangnes war und vor uns nicht die Zukunft.*

(O hours of childhood, when behind the figures there was more than the mere past, and what lay before us was not the future.)

RAINER MARIA RILKE  
*Duino Elegies*

### CHAPTER I

#### RED BALL, WHITE PEAR TREE, GREEN DOOR

IN THE BEGINNING there was a red ball. It bounced back from the green door of the house, and it rolled steadily, relentlessly down the flag walk, beneath the white wicket which I'd been forbidden to open, across a cobbled pavement and into a canal. That canal was one of Holland's inevitable canals. And it was my ball. It seems now that I experienced a great sense of shock and loss, but I must have been too young for such adult emotions. The only thing I'm sure that I remember is that the ball was red. Later I started wondering why the ball had rolled since our part of the country was completely flat, with only an occasional man-made semblance of a slope. There were no hills there, and hardly any fruit trees; yet I can remember two pear trees blooming in the next yard, on the other side of a high hedge.

That is all I remember of the house where I was born in the little town of Blija, in the province of Friesland, in the north part of The Netherlands. The house itself I can't remember, nor my father, or mother, or brothers, nor any other colours or shapes. The red ball bounced from a green door into a complete void. But the trees were beautiful, and in my memory they keep blooming perpetually through a ceaseless spring.

During those two nearly obliterated years in Blija, two other occurrences put faint brush strokes on the remembered picture

of my life. There was a kitten who fell into a pot of green paint (perhaps this is the only reason why I'm so convinced that door was green) and then that kitten was no more. And once, on a windy day, I was going round the corner of a brick wall to meet someone. That someone wore a dress with lace on it, but she had no features or voice. Only that dress with lace received me, and I buried my face in it because I was terribly afraid of the wind, or the strange houses, or the unknown spaces between them.

That woman was a schoolteacher who had lodgings in our house. I must have gone to meet her, Mother told me later. But she never could have told me about those pear trees, that red ball, and that lonely terror that I felt. Mothers don't tell such things to their children, not even thirty years later, when I at last asked her about these vaguely remembered things, and she could only recall them faultily and with effort. In themselves they were of course wholly unimportant. They were merely aspects of that primitive childhood world from which I was emerging. They hadn't yet become associated with other memories, they didn't align themselves with any past or future. But somehow, like old unimportant pictures on a wall, they remained visible long after later events removed and rearranged thousands of others.

I was approximately two and a half years old when we left Blija. I don't remember leaving, only that at some time later we lived in a large city, and still later we moved to the old town where both of my parents had been born. Except from a distance, I never saw Blija again, even though for many years we lived only ten miles away from it.

To-day, in America, people often insist on learning exactly where I was born. That's typical of Americans. When I obligingly say: "Blija," they exclaim: "But that's something somewhere in Hungary, or Slovakia, isn't it? That name . . ." And I explain: "It's a good old Frisian name." That means nothing at all to them. "Dutch," I explain. "Oh, German, the Kaiser and all that, eh?" And then I say rather indignantly, "Holland." Then helpfully, delightedly, they smile and say: "Ah, tulips, windmills, and the little boy who put his fingers in the dike . . ." often actually looking at my fingers, as if to see if I have washed them since. Americans are always having a fine time being wrong about Holland. The Dutch too have a fine time being wrong about America. Both stubbornly, with their preconceived ideas.

Still, the name Blija is somewhat of an anomaly there in our northern part of Friesland. Nearly all the old town names end in "um" a very few in "werd." The northern train which ran from

the provincial capital, Leeuwarden, to Anjum at the other end of the line, was commonly called the "Um-train." There were a score or more towns on it—approximately a mile apart—named: Britsum, Jannum, Deimum, Marum, Hallum, Hantum, Dokkum, Aalsum, Anjum, and all kinds of other "ums." Blija was an exception. For some inexplicable reason, I used to think that was very important and significant. The word "blij" in Dutch means happy or glad, and I considered that the addition of an extra "a" to that only made it more completely so. I took great pride in the fact that I had been born in a place with such a name, though I never dared to ask my parents or teachers what the real significance of the old Frisian name was for fear I might be proved wrong.

Later, when I looked at Blija from the train—it lay a quarter of a mile off the railroad—I saw a squat grey tower in a cluster of red tile roofs with a few towering elms above them. It was so like all those other north Frisian towns! Somehow, too, it is one of those places one forgets. When I was back in The Netherlands in 1938 I meant to go to Blija and look at the house I was born in. For some reason I simply forgot to, even though I came within two miles of the town.

I was born in June, on a Sunday morning, at dawn. There must have been a church bell ringing, a rooster crowing. My mother, in her Calvinist fashion, hoped that I'd become a minister, and laid her plans and said her prayers accordingly. I was a blessed and potentially ecclesiastic child. I was her second son, and I was named after her father, a most austere and unflexible Calvinist, who from my birth saw nothing but evil in me. Ostensibly because I was named after him, he treated me with particular disdain, often with actual cruelty. Perhaps one could call his attitude a sort of inverted sentimentality. Definitely, I was unworthy of his name, as in subsequent years he'd prove to me.

That name, David, was an unusual one for our part of the country. After I was five I longed terrifically to be called something splendid and normal like Frederick, or Hendrikus, or best of all Kassimir . . . anything but David. The undesirableness of that name became especially evident some time later. I won one of five prizes offered by a provincial newspaper with an essay on patriotism and religion. The other four prizes were all novels, Christian novels, emasculated and sentimental children's stories, but they were infinitely preferable to my prize. I got a book which dealt with the conversions of Jews to Christianity. It wasn't difficult to deduce why. It was that name David.

In Blija, naturally, I was still oblivious to the awkward concomitances of my name. We moved from Blija too soon. Nor could I or my brothers ever learn why we moved, at least not exactly. Even to-day our parents are strangely uncommunicative about the real reasons. From their somewhat shamefaced evasiveness I have concluded that it is quite possible that my father failed in his building business in Blija. A business failure in the minds of most respectable Dutchmen is tantamount to the unpardonable sin. It is unmentionable. One can't even pray to one's Calvinist God to be forgiven for having failed in one's business; for all other sins one can and should pray and unceasingly. Both my parents are zealously, unswervingly Calvinistic, of the strictest, most pious sort, and offering up prayers for sins of omission and commission has ever been one of their most devout habits. Yes, it must have been a business failure that uprooted us from Blija.

Both of my parents were twenty-eight at the time; so young and so fallible and so normal, hence so forgivable. But ask them to-day, in America, decades later, about Blija, and they both take refuge in a stubborn, guilty uncommunicativeness. Naturally, we three oldest boys who had been born in Blija soon realized that mention of our birthplace never covered us with any glory. Perhaps because we were born approximately fifteen months apart, even our individual beginnings have become somewhat vague in our parents' reminiscences.

Even that early there seemed to have been some talk about our migrating to South Africa. The Boer War had been over for some years, and unfortunately the Transvaal was becoming increasingly more English. Father, however, kept laying his plans and once almost sealed our fate, but Mother's parents descended upon us and put their collective feet down, and we moved to the city of Groningen instead.

Suddenly then, in my memories, there was another house. I don't remember any of its physical details nor do I even remember my parents within its walls. But I do recall a large meadow behind the house. A narrow canal separated our yard from that meadow. Father used to place a long heavy plank across it and go into the meadow to gather armfuls of the lavender-pink Pentecost flowers that bloomed there. I don't know what those flowers would be called in America; in Holland they usually bloomed during Pentecost Week, when the lilacs were also in bloom. That field always seemed to be filled with the flowers, to the very enormously blue horizon. There were never any cows in that meadow. Hence our bafflement when on fairly frequent occasions a red-faced, coarse-mouthed man would appear to chase Father

back across the plank. And each time when Father had safely recrossed the plank, our neighbours would cheer him, and the man would keep on cursing from the other bank of the canal. I don't remember the neighbours, only the way they cheered.

In the background beyond that lavender meadow, projected against the great blue sky, stood a row of tall white mills, turning their wide arms unhurriedly, creaking with tiredly gentle voices. They seemed much more important than mere human neighbours.

My oldest brother and I each had a pet rooster. My rooster was a very peculiar one. Its tail wouldn't grow and there was something wrong with its sense of equilibrium and of direction. It would start out bravely for some goal, then describe a weird crescent, and reach some wholly unintended destination, all too frequently in the canal. Then my brother and I would set up a loud clamour and invariably someone would rescue my rooster.

In my persisting memories there remain other things that were not quite right in Kostverloren. Kostverloren is the quaint name of the suburb we lived in. Next door lived a boy called Bertus, who was two years older than I was, and who seemed to be a problem child, to say the least. Accidents were always befalling him; deviltry marked all his actions. To us children he was *the* horrible example, to be shunned and condemned. Like my rooster, Bertus would all too frequently land in the canal; we always believed, however, that people were much more loath to rescue him from a watery grave than they were my simple-minded rooster. Hence our great surprise, not unmixed with chagrin, when one day we beheld our mother dragging the plank to the canal, placing it across, and then stretching out on her stomach on that plank, while with her hand she reached down into the water and started tugging at something resembling a black paint-brush. She pulled at it, and up beneath it came Bertus' grotesque face, then his whole sodden body.

To our utter bewilderment, when we asked her why she had bothered to extract such a symbol of iniquity from the canal, she told us that Bertus was also one of God's creatures, moulded and shaped by His own hand. It upset me for weeks and threw all my previous simple concepts into disorder. Especially when a few hours after the rescue Bertus reappeared in dry clothes, but unsubdued, and boasted that he was now a drowned boy. And who was I to contradict him? His antics hardly became those of a spirit. But when one drowned one became a spirit in heaven, or worse. Mother's explanations seemed to have helped me very little; years later I was still convinced that drowned people simply



put on dry clothes and started ranting and boasting. My brother, practical soul that he is, soon forgot the episode and refused to take part in my bewilderment, and insisted on remembering things which didn't matter to me at all.

I was reputed to have been a brilliant and unusual child. So said my mother, uncles, aunts and cousins. I have no way now of disentangling their early hopes and pride from my own childish worth, nor even from their later disappointment in me. Every so often I'm still reminded that if I hadn't become so willful, or so flighty, or so American, I might to-day be an ardent Dutch divine, an incomparable exegete, a great saver of souls of Borneo.

Ironically enough, those great expectations of me began with a linen picture book. Once, during my still more early infant years, that book had had both illustrations and text, but the zealous exercising of proverbial Dutch cleanliness had obliterated them. Now the book had only blank white linen pages, which mattered very little to me, as I remembered exactly what words or pictures had filled each page, and I still kept reading the book as if it weren't blank at all. I certainly must be a budding genius, people declared; and without the slightest bit of prompting I would recite to them the exact tale of the tomcat and the rooster who started out to see the world, but ended up in the stewpot of wolves and foxes while the mother hen lamented their fate from a nearby fence. Also, before I was four years old, I could sing without a single mistake or quaver a dozen or two of the heftiest Dutch rhymed psalms. All this indubitably pointed to the cloth.

But we lived in *Kostverloren*, and a suburb with such a name might well be an ill omen. Verbally translated, *Kostverloren* means lost price, or lost worth, or lost subsistence. Whatever genius I may have had I certainly left behind there. *Kosverloren* was a humble place. We were now very poor. Mother used to tell us boys. But happy. Much happier than we would ever have been in *Steenuilskopje* or *Bonte Hondsrand* in the *Transvaal* or the *Orange Free State*, we gathered. But why are we poor, Mother? Neither Father nor Mother would commit themselves, except to say that if one was rich in Christ, it was no dishonour to be poor, certainly not when one paid his outstanding debts, kept his clothes well mended and his house and front stoop scrupulously clean. Holiness and cleanliness closely intermingled; but that was part of being Dutch, and as a child I despaired of differentiating between these two virtues.

I remember, too, climbing over a blue turnstile into a green field where a white gander attacked me. It was in *Kostverloren*

because the tall white mills were in the background whirling away obliviously, and no one came from them to drive the cantankerous goose away. And Bertus who should have been a spirit stood laughing at me. Then *Kostverloren* fades. . . .

Then we moved into the city itself. Groningen, before the Nazis overwhelmed it, was a city of some 110,000 population. When I was a child it was somewhat smaller, but it was a bustling old city with a proud cathedral, market squares and medieval gates, and with handsome avenues and promenades along its many canals. In the centre of the city the leaning, battered houses showed many scars of battle, including musket balls imbedded in old gables, dating from the Spanish and Napoleonic Wars. The city is only twenty-odd miles from the German border, and as the largest city in the northern and eastern half of the Netherlands it might have been considered of strategic importance. No one, however, seriously thought of Germany on the eastern borders as a potential menace.

I was now four, and events started crowding forward to fix themselves in my memory more frequently and more ineradicably. For the first time I remembered the interior of the house where we now lived. It was a second-floor corner flat in a block bristling with straight, ugly, red brick buildings, all of which were made more hideous by incongruously large windows. Mother complained of all the curtains and all the weekly window washing they called for. But I could go from window to window and look out, always upon the same scene. No meadow, no mirroring canals, no fanning windmills, but the identically ugly houses repeated, each staring back with insolent, unblinking windows. From those houses, all of which were three or four stories high, emerged people, invariably drunk people. At least, so I believed. Drunk people were dangerous and wicked, and so it would never do for me to descend the stairs alone and go down the street unaccompanied. That was why the narrow dark stairway was such an especially sinister place to me. Anything evil could ascend from that dark pit.

It seemed to be always winter, too. There was nothing green to look at, nothing that bloomed. It seemed an unhappy, colourless place, but I was supposed to have been a contented child, not nearly as restive as my older brother who ventured down those stairs any and every time he got a chance. Then with reckless aplomb he'd start out to find the cattle market.

The cattle market could be reached by crossing six bridges over an equal number of canals. Twice a week, farmers and cattle-dealers from the three north-eastern provinces gathered

there to trade their Holstein-Frisian cattle. Twice a week, weather permitting, Mother would take us to look at those cows. They didn't fascinate me nearly as much as they did my brother, who when the time came to go home again, would have to be pried loose from the cast-iron fence surrounding the market and dragged home. All this time I was on the alert for drunks, and usually found at least ninety per cent of the unsuspecting populace in that interesting though deplorable condition. Mother didn't even pretend to disillusion me till years later, when Groningen relatives took offence at my conception of their city as a gathering place of drunkards. By that time there was no longer any danger that I, too, might descend the stairs to partake of the glory and dangers the city had to offer.

At the head of those stairs, furthermore, there was a mysterious glass door over which hung a white curtain embroidered with a pair of staring peacocks. Behind that door was the family fuel supply, shrouded in impenetrable darkness, into which sometimes Father or Mother would go, leaving me behind in such dread that I couldn't breathe normally again till they were safely back. There in that dark fuel room were the Lost Souls and the Condemned Souls. That was my own private belief, and my secret which, for some profound childish reason, I wouldn't divulge even to my parents. Neither did I want this particular bit of awful conviction clarified, or explained away.

I had recently learned about the Lost and Condemned Souls in church. My parents had started taking me to the Calvinist church of their denomination. The first time I'd been disappointed because God didn't appear in long robes and a long white beard. I don't remember any minister, only a gallery in which sat many people who seemed to be doing a lot of coughing. From repeated visits to this strange place, I was conditioned to believe in the Souls who dwelt in the eternal darkness of our fuel room. I don't remember what particular but certainly faulty logic led me to that conclusion.

I had an enormous box filled with small toy houses, trees and churches. Sometimes I set those up in a long row which extended through two rooms, and out on to the small passage at the head of the stairs, actually within reach of the Lost and Condemned Souls. Then I'd sit back in terror to watch the Wrath of God descend upon my town. Invariably, I'd end by frantically destroying the town myself, before there was any actual chance of seeing God's Wrath materialize in person. Then I'd make circular cities, which, to the mystification of my mother, I would announce that I was building at the command of Moses, some to be

cities of refuge, others those of the Levites. On the whole, Mother approved devoutly of the Biblicalness of my games.

Then when another spring was due, we left Groningen and we went home. Home was the old town of Wierum where both of our parents had been born, and all their parents before them for many generations. There a new and wholly different life would start for us. Life in wooden shoes, behind high dikes menaced by the ever-threatening North Sea, which would actually be roaring above us, because the town itself was lower than sea-level. Wierum was very old, very hoary, crusted with history. Besides, it had the reputation of being an unpredictable and considerably dangerous place.

Already I knew all that about Wierum from what my parents and relatives had said. Also it had a church and tower which, according to many authorities, were the oldest in all the land. The sea had encroached upon Wierum so often and so successfully that there was only a mere sliver of the old town left, hugging an elbow of the dike. All this dated back at least to the year 800, when some historical facts had been recorded, but there were legends and old wives' tales that went back long before.

Actually we were going to Wierum because Father's father had died, and now Father was going to take over the old business. He really had no right to this business because he wasn't Grandfather's oldest son. But Father's oldest brother, Meindert, was a deaf-mute. All this I knew was very important, and freighted with solemn traditions, promises, hopes and some very real worries.

Wierum was going to be home. Blija was merely the accidental place of my birth; Kostverloren and Groningen mere interludes. In Wierum I'd have to start wearing wooden shoes, or the people there would be offended. And the very next winter I would have to learn to skate. On the first of April, which was so close, I would have to start going to school, though I wouldn't be five till June.

But before any of these great events could happen, the North Sea would give me an inkling of its power by sweeping over the dike and flooding Wierum. That happened in March, two days after my brother Meindert was born, three or four weeks after we'd moved to Wierum.

The responsibilities of life were starting for me, I knew, but God would be my helper, if I prayed. There in Wierum I'd have some overpowering grandparents to cope with, and some very much in evidence uncles and aunts. And new and strange duties, so that God would become indispensable as a daily, though invisible companion.

"Poor child, poor heart," an old fishwife said to me soon after our arrival in Wierum. "Coming from so far, and knowing nothing about us and our ways. Poor lamb." She wiped my dry eyes with her fishy-smelling blue woollen apron and then hobbled dolefully away on her scoured wooden shoes.

## CHAPTER II

### VERY OLD TOWN

WE MOVED TO WIERUM because Grandfather had died. But he had actually died over a year before, and I'm still at a loss as to how to account for that year's interim. I can even remember him on his deathbed, and from that memory came the persistent belief that all good old men die as Grandfather died.

I was three. Father had lifted me in his arms so that I could look into the high, black-polished wall bed, through the starched white curtains and beyond the ornately carved doors of the bed, at the white face with a black beard upon the white pillow and just above the white sheet. All these things represented Grandfather dying. And I was there because he had expressed a dying wish to see his only grandchildren, Father's children. I saw dark eyes watching me, and then felt a hot white hand touch my cheek.

The picture remained indelible, and connected with it, the constant belief that my grandfather was a very good, a very wise, and very kind man. It didn't even matter particularly that subsequent reports bore out that belief. For years I simply kept on believing that all old men die worthily when they have dark beards and lie in white beds with carved doors.

We and all our goods and chattels moved to Wierum on a canal boat which took many days to navigate the tortuous canals from Groningen to our new home. There seems to have been very little wind to help us along; besides, the boat was loaded so high that it was inadvisable to hoist the sails. Innumerable bridges had to be raised to let us through, while three tried and valiant men punted and guided us along for some thirty miles, past at least thirty towns and villages that stood beside those avenues of water. I don't remember the actual journey, but all canal boat journeys were so.

I do remember our boat's reaching the last bridge which marked the town boundary of Wierum and getting stuck beneath that bridge, because it was a stationary one which couldn't be

raised to let us through. Wierum's old bells started tolling, summoning people home from the fields because it was evening. Suddenly the roads were filled with people, and the bridge above us became lined with men and women—robust and noisy people, clattering along on wooden shoes—who after much jocular advice, offered a modicum of help to get us dislodged. Then we went around one final turn down the old canal, past a flock of cows looking at us from a high green dike, and then came the houses of Wierum.

That, however, isn't the way I remember coming to Wierum. I have another conception, which, though contrary to fact, is all the more true because it won't deny itself.

It was a grey and windy day. The sky was a churning grey, the fields were barren brown, the geometric trellis-work of canals and ditches merely mirrored the mobile sky more dolorously. I was walking with my mother on top of the dike toward Wierum. She was leading one of my brothers with her other hand. Silent, grave sheep would shudder aside a few feet to let us pass, and then would flock together again. To our left was the grey-green, endlessly roaring sea. The dike merely cut a green path along the thin margin where sea and low brown land met, and curved stolidly on toward an old stumpy tower and a cluster of red roofs. That was Wierum.

I was afraid, with an indescribable fear, a vague premonition that we three were walking out into space and time, suspended between heaven and earth, with the sea converging upon us from the left, and the desolate earth stretching to the right. The wind was buffeting us. It was in our mouths, so that we couldn't speak; in our ears so that we couldn't hear anything but roaring. We clung anxiously close to Mother's skirts, which were flapping angrily against us. We were even apprehensive of the silently staring sheep, with their broken, grey-tragic eyes. The journey seemed interminable. Surely before we reached any safe destination the sea would overwhelm us. What was this lean ribbon of elevated greensward that it could prevent the sea from hurling itself upon the supine land on the other side, land several feet lower than the sea itself. We walked and walked, surely we'd never reach Wierum.

I don't remember reaching it, or that that journey ever ended. I don't know now which trip that was, or when; we must have gone with Mother to visit our Tante Grietje in nearby Nes. Still, that baleful journey became fixed in my mind as our arrival in Wierum. Actually we must have lived in Wierum for some time before it happened, because I remember I was wearing wooden

shoes. My brother and I kept stamping and clattering them to chase the sheep from our path.

Until my new brother Meindert was born, and while our own new house was being built, we lived in our maternal grandfather's house. That is, in the house of the man whose name I bore, the man I had no opportunity to like, even though I was frequently commanded to do so, and to pray on bended knees because I was so sinful in not liking him.

His house was very old, a low rambling weathered brick structure. Rather, it was a long, spacious wing, one of a whole cluster of buildings which hugged the graveyard mound in which all the town's dead were buried, and in the centre of which stood the old church and tower. The mound was man-made, reputedly dating back twelve centuries, built to guard the church and the dead from the sea before there were any dikes. Also it was supposed to be part of the old ramparts of the town, a remnant of the days when Wierum was a sizable city, before the sea had engulfed a great part of it, as proved by the old silt-covered pavements which were sometimes still unearthed on the sea side of the dike. No one knew exactly. Each year new excavations revealed a little more.

This cluster of buildings where my grandfather's house was stood apart from the rest of the town. Evidently he owned all of it. The superstitious fisherfolk refused to live in any part of it, because the cemetery ghosts were too close neighbours. The central building was a high-roofed, wide-raftered one called the old school. It had been some sort of place of instruction during the seventeenth century. Now it simply housed Grandfather's equipment for hauling fish, drying fish, and selling fish; also a whole conglomeration of farm and garden implements, and vast armies of rats. From this large central place jutted gables and wings, in which other families lived. All these places were connected by doors and passages, sometimes nailed shut and walled in, to be half forgotten, and then for some reason opened up again. No wonder the fisherfolk called the cluster of buildings haunted, and refused to pass along the narrow street flanking it except in pairs.

Grandfather's wing was long, low, and damp. We lived in the new end of it, my grandparents in the old. The latter part was fascinating, typically old Frisian. The walls, flanking the old hearth were covered with blue Delft tiles depicting the stories of the Bible, which were an endless source of interest to us city-raised children. The tiles were arranged in chronological order, starting with Adam and Eve and the horned serpent just beneath the ceiling in the corner by the first cupboard-bed, and ending

with St. John on Patmos gazing upon the eternal golden city in the low dark corner behind Grandmother's chair.

On the lace-fringed mantelshelf stood numerous curios and all manner of grotesque ceramics. Underneath hung the burnished copper kettles, fire pots and tongs. But the two lovers' benches were no longer there. Grandfather didn't believe in such romantic frippery, and never had, it seemed. Where the walls weren't tiled, they were filled with hooked, tatted and embroidered Bible texts and with maxims attesting to Dutch thrift, virtue and domesticity. The wall farthest from the windows was entirely occupied by the cupboard-beds, in tiers of three. The little ladders to the highest beds were kept secreted behind the bed-doors, and the latter were kept modestly closed when no one occupied the bed, sometimes even when the bed contained a moderately ill patient who had no particular need of fresh air. Grandfather himself was in the habit of buying fifteen and twenty pound cheeses which he allowed to age on the shelf in the bed, just over his head, so that he and his bed seemed ever redolent of pungent cheeses.

The red-tiled floors were covered with Oriental straw mats. Holland's colonies, the East Indies, were further represented by the scattering of batiks, teakwoods, fans and exotic stuffed birds, even occasional heathenish weapons, which we soon took as much for granted as the homely wall mottoes proclaiming: **THE LORD SHALL SURELY KEEP THEE** and **NO ROOSTER CROWS AS BEAUTIFULLY AS THE ROOSTER BACK HOME**. Just outside the low sagging windows rose the cemetery mound with its small forest of white markers which extended to the heavy buttresses of the old church.

While we were waiting for our new brother to be born, we occupied the back rooms, the so-called new part of the house, which was perhaps barely two hundred years old. There it happened that within four days my brother was born, and the sea came over the dike, so that Father had to carry us to safety through swirling, gurgling water in the deep of the night, while the church bell tolled relentlessly. It all seemed to happen so casually that I simply accepted it as one of the natural phenomena of the old town, which already was so full of widows and orphans, and in which people seemed so much concerned with death.

That night several people were drowned, and one street was swept entirely into the canal. The dike had come perilously close to breaking through, and that would have been the end of all of us. We couldn't foresee that it would never happen again as long as we lived in Wierum. The next morning, clinging to Father's hand, I looked at the ruined houses, the jagged, gaping holes in



the sea side of the dike—in which old human skeletons lay row upon row—the wrecked fishing sloops and the heaps of bloated drowned sheep upon the dike. Already a group of anthropologists were measuring the extraordinarily large skulls of the old human skeletons, to determine what bygone race they represented—naturally, to the great indignation of the fisherfolk. I asked Father: “But why do people keep living here?” He said: “Because they’ve lived here for centuries and centuries.” Centuries sounded like eternities; the answer was sufficient. So the sea kept on roaring above us and threatening us, but the centuries were on our side.

“Besides,” Father assured me, “every year they build the dikes higher and stronger,” and he went hurrying down the dike slope to help some men drag a drowned woman from the canal. He shouted that I shouldn’t look, but I saw the woman’s mouth wide open and filled with silt and seashells. Somehow it wasn’t so terrible as all those swollen dead sheep.

I’m afraid we children took that flood and its tragedies rather for granted; it was one of those things to be expected of Wierum, together with all our omnipresent relatives and the too overpowering fisherfolk. I for my part was more impressed by all the strange sightseers crowding our narrow streets after the flood, giving our tiny town a sort of cosmopolitan aspect. Unfortunately, however, our own new house which was in the process of being built couldn’t be finished now for months, and we’d have to continue living in Grandfather’s house, in the very presence of Grandfather David himself. Already I knew that my Pake David found no delight in me. He was altogether too expressive when he grumbled that I was unworthy of bearing his name and that any of my brothers would have been more worthy of that honour.

So it was with some measure of relief that our parents allowed my brother and me to accept the invitation of a great-uncle to spend a week with him at his “monastery” in the lonely eastern polders. His wife, our Great-Aunt Djoeke, a wrenlike little woman, argued that Wierum was at present too full of marauders, and besides, our new brother Meindert needed more space to grow in. But our Great-Uncle Tjippe warned us dourly: “Beware of the leviathan in the well of our living-room. If you go near the well he’ll crunch you like a pear, and then you’ll be no more than offal.” He was very deaf and seemed very unapproachable, gnarled and indestructible; we took his pronouncements as a warning from the Almighty himself, with due fear and trembling, but also with unquenchable curiosity.

Our aunt and uncle did live in an old monastery, in a lonely

windswept spot called Sjora. Most of the old monastery had been allowed to fall in ruins before our uncle had bought it. A few cloisters remained, now bulging with hay, and the dwelling place of swine, cattle and goats. Several of the lonely arches stood half hidden in last year's rushes, and fat green frogs croaked volubly from the deep moats as we drove into the cloister. "They'll tune down their croaking when the storks arrive from Africa. It's still too early in the year," our uncle boomed authoritatively, though we had thought him too deaf even to hear those frogs. Then he unhitched the horses and led them toward the wide stone-topped well in the dead centre of "our front room," as our little aunt described the sort of court in which we were. The "front room" had no walls on the north side, and nothing but three crumbling arches on the south. The horses, evidently unafraid of the leviathan, plunged their heads into the overflowing well, snorted, gurgled and plunged their heads down again, while my brother and I clutched our aunt's hands, tense with horrified anticipation. "Maybe it's not exactly a leviathan," our little aunt consoled us, "but just a pickerel, just big enough to snap your poor little heads off. You see, the horses aren't afraid because they are so strong."

It was dusk then and the winds made terrible speech among the old arches and gables and the North Sea moaned behind the dike, while the frogs continued their ceaseless symphony. There was only one tree in all that land and at it our uncle now pointed, and bellowed: "That's where they hanged the last five monks that lived here. Hanged them for their iniquities." But our little aunt protested: "Tjip, Tjip, don't talk like that to children. Don't you. . . ." And she explained to us that our deaf uncle talked that way because he had never had any children, nor had she for that matter, and then she added brightly: "Now we'll go to bed. Because that saves lighting many lamps. The house is so big and wide and cold."

We were put to bed in a room with a broken door just off that "front room" with its ominous well. For hours we lay awake, clutching each other, listening to the winds, the sea, the frogs, and the occasional baleful flipping of fins which we knew were the leviathan's. Long before midnight we started wailing out our terror, loudly, because our uncle was so deaf and our aunt seemed too frail to help us. Twice our aunt appeared with a smoking kerosene lamp, but she could only say: "We can't take both of you into bed with us, and we can't leave one of you alone. Now just go to sleep. That leviathan never leaves the well. Why, it would die if it did."

We barely lasted through a second night. Then just at break of dawn our little aunt dressed us, and our deaf uncle set off with us in the direction of Wierum, taking turns carrying me and my brother on his back, all the seven miles. The only remark he made during all that journey was: "No, I can't tire out the horses. Not and do the spring ploughing. So I've got to be the horse." And so he deposited us safely in battered, tourist-ridden Wierum again, where more real dangers didn't frighten us in the least. "You scared little doll," Grandfather growled at me, "you must have kept your brother frightened." His remark didn't seem fair, especially since Great-Uncle Tjippe had made no explanation at all when he set us on the stoop, except to turn on his heel and say: "Got to trudge back now. Got to plough all day." He had even refused the cup of coffee our grandmother offered him.

### CHAPTER III

#### PAKE DAVID AND LITTLE BEPPE

GRANDFATHER DAVID WAS a tall, broad, blond man with florid cheeks and eyes of an almost nacreous blue. He did not like children in general, but he had a reputation for loving and spoiling his grandchildren. I, of course, was the exception, supposedly because I was the one who had been named after him. Mother frequently explained that was the reason he felt shy and gauche with me. Of course, I knew better, especially when I realized that she was always taking special pains to convince me. I had to believe her, Mother explained. After all, wasn't Pake David a pillar of the Church, and a most meritorious example of faith and staunch judgment? Of course, he hated levity and frivolity and all citified ways. And she didn't explain that obviously he had ruled his four daughters with such an autocratic hand that in good Calvinistic feminine fashion they all worshipped him, or at least felt duty bound to do so. From the beginning, therefore, I was forbidden to hate my Pake David, even though he never had one smile or kind word for me, nor one moment of sympathy or even patience.

To differentiate him from Father's father who had just died, I shall call him Pake David, especially since both my grandfathers were "DeJongs," though in no way related. But then, almost one quarter of Wierum's population were DeJongs: some were dark

and lean like Father's people, but by far the greater majority were completely Nordic in appearance, like my grandfather David. Some were fisherfolk, some mere landlubbers. Pake David was a little of each, and acted contrary to both. My other grandfather, Pake Remmeren, was supposed to have come of better social stock. In general one made much of that in Holland, though considerably less in Wierum, where the fisherfolk refused to stand in awe of anything except themselves and their own Christ who had walked upon the waves.

Pake David was strictly self-educated, but had the reputation of being a learned man, one unusually versed in Church doctrine, a supreme exegete. His library was reputed to be one of the largest in town. That library—four or five shelves of parchment-bound tomes hidden behind a heavy brown curtain—used to intrigue me. Only one of those books, a missionary's journal, was illustrated, and with exactly one illustration: a coloured engraving showing a large yellow tiger leaping upon a brown native while a white missionary was in the act of pulling the trigger of an oversized gun. Since we children weren't allowed to touch the books, and none bore titles on their uniform parchment bindings, the few sporadic attempts we made to find that one lurid picture usually went unrewarded, except for a scolding. Most of the books were dull and lengthy commentaries on the Epistles of St. Paul.

Pake David was somewhat of a trader, a farmer, a wholesale fish-dealer, with two or three minor occupations thrown in for good measure. He also owned a canal-boat with which he hauled freight twice a week, to and from the market town of Dokkum. Occasionally he took longer trips, to Leeuwarden, or even Groningen. When he returned from such trips we children were commanded to forgather at his house to receive the presents he had bought us. Pake David never forgot his grandchildren. He didn't forget me either; no, he intentionally slighted me. Even so I was forced to attend such gatherings, and I was expected to smile gratefully when Grandfather told me, after he'd presented each of my brothers with a present: "As for you, well I was certain that by the time I got home you wouldn't deserve whatever I'd get for you. So . . ." He would then make one of his brushing-off gestures with his large tapering hands, beckon the other children round his favourite chair and sit there revelling unashamedly in their worshipful attention. At that point Mother would usually slip me some little present, hinting very surreptitiously that Pake David was actually too shy to give it to me himself. But I was never fooled; I knew all too well from which of the few humble shops in Wierum my present came.

I knew, too, that all this was supposed to strengthen my character. In sheer self-defence I strengthened it in my own way, resolving only half consciously that I wasn't going to allow my Pake David to break my spirit. It hurt terribly at first, but when I realized that I was only defeating myself by showing signs of being hurt, I soon learned to counter all such wilful attacks on me with at least a show of impassivity. The latter worried my mother considerably; it seemed Godless, really unregenerate. Of course, all this took several years to accomplish.

In the meanwhile Pake David increased his reputation for being an amusing, eccentric and quaint man in his dealing with children. No one ever seemed to worry about what effect his attitude might have upon the fumbling logic in my disturbed mind. If Pake David stood so close to God, then where did I stand if he rejected me so much? If he was such a strong and stern man that he was entitled to his sadistic eccentricities, wouldn't it be much better to be weak and even sinful, and as an attribute to such negative qualities, kindly?

During the first two years in Wierum, however, I felt continually puzzled and frightened by my relationship with my grandfather. His first definite reaction toward me happened soon after our arrival in town. If I was going to start school in April, I would have to be vaccinated for smallpox. For that purpose I had to be taken immediately to a doctor in a neighbouring town, because the results of the vaccinations were often so violent that they had to be performed well in advance of the opening day of school. Wierum had no doctor. The fisherfolk had little use for one. They and the chronically sick and superannuated summoned an old codger from back of the polders, an old semi-hex doctor, who was frequently too drunk to reach town even on his tricycle. But he was lavish with herbs, pungent medicines and nostrums, and his fee was exceedingly small as he confessed to practising his profession "for the beauty of it."

So it became necessary for Pake David to take me to the village of Nijkerk, four miles away, to be vaccinated. We went on foot, and I wasn't yet used to walking any distance in wooden shoes, but Pake David refused to let me wear my leather ones. Naturally, he also refused to carry me on his shoulders when I got tired, although he would have done so willingly for any of my brothers. Instead, he made me keep pace with him. In Nijkerk he at once ordered the doctor not to treat me too gently, because I was nothing but "a silken little shirt." After the doctor had jabbed me once, and I had obviously disappointed Pake David by not crying, he shouted, "Jab him a dozen times more, doctor. I know

he has plenty of evil in him which you'd better punch out of him." The doctor must have obeyed him for reasons of his own, let me assume gently, because my right arm still bears a neat dozen vaccination marks all inflicted on that one occasion. But even all the way back home Pake David made me run at a trot to keep pace with him.

Ah yes, Pake David loved to have his other grandchildren lean over the back of his chair. He would then let them smoke surreptitiously from one of his pipes, of which he kept a score in the table drawer. He would let them sip the strong coffee out of his saucer and eat his lard-saturated potatoes. The grandchildren got sick, and Grandmother and my parents tried to stop him, but how the children loved him!

Naturally, I was barred from such favours, too. I was always ordered to stay several paces from his chair and to behave myself. Those forbidden favours if applied to me, I gathered, would be miraculously of the devil, to abet the myriads of devils already residing in me. When he took us children walking, he ordered me to stay five paces ahead so that he could keep an eye on my behaviour. He had a patch of cultivated ground a mile away from town. It could be reached by many tortuous paths flanking numerous canals. Late summers, when we boys went pole vaulting across the countryside, we would frequently come upon Pake David. He would receive the others with open arms, but he'd order me back home, shouting: "Is that all you have to do with your good-for-nothing body? Remember, idleness is the ear-pillow of Satan." But he would put my brothers in his wheelbarrow and push them all the way to town when the evening bells began to ring.

Only when he could assign to me some sort of onerous job, like cleaning out his goat-shed, did he consider my presence tolerable at all. When I did clean the goat-shed for him, he heaped so much scorn upon me for my so-called dainty sensibilities that I flatly refused the next time he asked me. My disobedience cost me my dinner, and I was sent to the attic to inform God of what I had done. I was stubborn; so was my grandfather. In his case, however, stubbornness was a great virtue, in mine it was weakness and sin.

Among the Calvinistic Church people he was greatly respected. Most of the fisherfolk dreaded him because he was such a zealous prohibitionist. Two of his brothers had died of drinking, either directly or indirectly, so perhaps he had just cause for fighting against alcohol. Furthermore, he despised most of the customs of the town. When at eight in the morning, at one at midday, and

six in the evening the church bell was tolled to summon the workers from the fields, he would choose his own time, usually thirty minutes later. So much of everyday conduct filled him with contempt that the exceptions were glaringly noticeable.

In church, too, he was the individualist. He didn't rent a pew near the front as befitted his age, class and dignity. Nor did he deign to sit in the back, in the free pews, which were mainly occupied by the emotional fishermen and the poorer landlubbers. No, his special sphere was the first pew in the balcony, beside the organ, which he despised, and tried to outshout. He could do it too, because he had a tremendous voice, and the organ was wheezy, and the old man pumping it anæmic and decrepit. Normally the balcony pews weren't rented, as they were only used on special occasions when the church was overcrowded. But Pake David had decided to have a pew there, or none at all.

Of course, the women sat on one side of the church, the men on the other. Only men were allowed to come to the meetings when the pews were auctioned off. Kindly and perpetually tired Grandmother Tjitske simply had to accept whatever seat Pake David rented for her. Usually he got so involved in some theological argument as soon as he'd safely rented his own balcony pew, that he frequently forgot about her until the last drafty corner seat would be the only one available.

Sundays he took all of us grandchildren with him to sit in his balcony pew. We were admonished to sing as loud as he did, to drown out that "lace-panties" organ. He would watch us critically, and peer zealously down the exposed, pink topography of our throats to see that we didn't leave one muscle in there unstrained. Also he was pretty slack in discipline, except when I was concerned. I usually had to bear the brunt of the punishment for all the misdeeds of the others. Our most exciting pastime was extracting earwigs, sewing bugs and spiders from the cracked plaster of the church walls, and dropping them from the balcony upon the row of bald-headed worshippers below, but I could seldom enjoy myself in this way. While my brothers dropped dozens of bugs without Grandfather's ever noticing anything, the very first and minutest bit of insect life I let go of would be noticed by him and I would be reprimanded. Then I'd be forced to sit directly beside him and hold my peace. For all that I was supposed to have been a very well-behaved and pious child, and even my mother had no reason to doubt but that I was heading straight for some future parsonage. However, my grandfather would constantly assure her that my exemplary behaviour wasn't "the real stuff."

Pake David could outquote any minister, he was a leader at funerals, he contributed lavishly to the theological seminary at Kampen, to the national Prohibition League and to heathen missionary work in Celebes, Lombok, Soemba and Soembava. He professed great loyalty to the royal house, because the Bible demanded it. But on Queen Wilhelmina's birthday he would tauntingly go to the fields in his oldest working clothes when everybody else wore their Sunday best and orange cockades. Naturally, he hated socialists, and neckties, and couples in love, and men who wore white collars, and Pharisees, and people who made rhetorical speeches about God and sin, and professional moralists and dissemblers of every sort.

We called Pake David's wife, our grandmother, Little Beppe. Great Beppe was what we called our father's mother, but in stature and actual physical weight, Little Beppe was by far the larger. Her name was Tjitske, a name which in itself was enough of a shibboleth to mark her as a Frisian. Even ordinary Hollanders couldn't pronounce it. She was a very kindly, very slow, and very patient woman, who always seemed sad, and who tried to move gently and unobtrusively in the shadow of her important husband.

Naturally, at the time I never thought of her as a typical Frisian peasant woman. Perhaps she wasn't. She lived and dressed humbly, performed humble duties, and thought and expressed ideas befitting a woman's inferior station; yet she wore the traditional Frisian golden helmet on Sundays, and beneath that helmet her hair had been shorn, as an indication of a somewhat exalted station in our society. True, her helmet wasn't as broad as the one that Great Beppe wore, nor were her various lace caps, which covered though never quite eclipsed the gold, of such intricate and costly designs. But it was a golden helmet, though a narrow one, to be exact. Still evil rumour would have it that one year in order to pay some debts she'd pawned her helmet and wore a humble copper one—naturally fully hidden by her caps.

Furthermore, she was the leader of the women in the funeral processions, which in itself attested to some sort of dignified place in Wierum's society. It was all very complicated, and I never understood all the fine points of social distinction in Wierum, but I did know that the fisherfolk women treated her with great respect. Of course, funerals were of prime importance to the fisherfolk, and marked high points in their social programme.

How our Little Beppe achieved her envied position, I never learned. She was too self-effacing to have gained it through any personal ambition. The role fitted her, however. She was an old



slow woman who always seemed on the way to something sad or to someone who needed comfort. For me she was always there to alleviate the hurts Pake David inflicted upon me. I would sit near her while she peeled potatoes, and she'd allow me to sail reed boats in the pail of water in which she dropped the potatoes. Then she would be God, or the awful west wind, and my ships would capsize or brave the storm, whenever she dropped another peeled potato. She was always much concerned about the wrath of the west wind and told many stories about storms that came from the west and capsized boats and made more orphans and widows in Wierum. Because she was an inlander, she was terrified of the sea, and had never grown accustomed to its potential dangers. She didn't quite understand fisherfolk's ways or emotions but she knew how to suffer with them, and how to administer to them when they were sick or dying. She would also worry over my city clothes, my little short pants, my leather shoes. "But your mother shouldn't let you wear them," she would fret. "After all she's a Wierumer. And they offend the Wierumers and your pake so. What will people say? . . ." But it was a tired and kindly worrying, and then we'd get up and she'd go and milk the goats while I fed them.

Fifteen minutes before the tower bell summoned the field-workers home at evening, I'd go with her to that portion of the dike marked off by a vermilion fence behind which the townfolk kept their sheep. She always waddled, and I'd have to waddle with her because she held my hand so tightly against her hip. So we'd waddle slowly to the sheepfold together, while invariably she worried aloud to me about the milk yield: would there be enough to make a cheese, or just barely enough for coffee? In spring, when the sheep were with lambs there'd be barely enough, she predicted dolefully. We'd progress slowly along the foot of the dike toward the red fence, and other women would also be on their way there with their little red stone milking jugs. Always old women, because the young ones would be in the fields or at home with their children.

Often we'd all sit down on the brick steps of the dike while the two sheep boys would gather the sheep which might have ranged as far as the next red fence, marking the grazing grounds of Nes along the dike. The old women would talk about local events and the weather. When the sheep came around the bend of the dike, each woman would select her own, and the milking would start, a slow business accompanied by much chattering. Finally the six o'clock bells would send them all scurrying back home to give the field-workers their evening meal. And through it all, on top of the

dike, fisherfolk women would stand and gaze out toward the sea, or they would watch the women milking their sheep, naturally scorning any such landlubberly husbandry.

Once, when a sudden storm came up, Little Beppe and I had to hurry through rain and wind to find the two sheep which were grazing on the reclaimed grasslands on the sea side of the dike. Everywhere other women and children went hurrying along for the same purpose. On top of the dike the wind was so strong that we had to hold hands to make any headway at all. Already the incoming tide came galloping like an army of frenzied grey horses upon the dumb sheep, who made no attempt whatever to reach the safety of the dike. They simply stood there stupidly till all we children and old women joined hands and circled around them, and drove them to the dike slope just ahead of the swirling waters.

When we were struggling homeward again through the pelting rain, Little Beppe said tenderly: "Ach, but you are really a good boy. You can't help it that you were brought up in the city." She pulled me close to her and covered my head with her woollen apron, and when we were safely home, we each ate a smoked dried flounder, after she'd got out her old fish scissors and cut mine into the shape of a many feathered bird. We were having a fine time together, until I heard the bleating of the goats and knew that Pake David was approaching the house. As usual I jumped up and hurried away, and as usual Little Beppe cried—while already guiltily clearing away the fish-leavings: "Oh now, now, David, you don't have to run. Perhaps this time he doesn't mean to be harsh, perhaps . . ."

One summer day, some time after we had moved into our new house, Mother sent me with a message to Little Beppe. I hurried on my errand, forgetting that it was the hour when Pake David was invariably home. I also forgot, that two days previously my grandparents had moved from the old front of the house to the newer and cooler back part. Accordingly, I blithely ran all the length of the flagstone-paved hallway and into the old living-room, only to find it empty and in its "summer trim." The Oriental fans had been opened, the mats shellacked, the chairs and tables covered with exotic little scarves. Hurriedly I started retreating to the back half of the house, but I was too late. Pake David intercepted me, saying grimly: "An ass never stumbles twice over the same stone. But my grandson and namesake would . . ." and he cuffed my ears so resoundingly that he utterly scared the message I had to bring to Little Beppe out of my mind. On that occasion Little Beppe said gravely: "Ach, man,

the child was merely forgetful. Is that a sin? He meant no ill, surely." Those were the most rebellious words I ever heard her say.

She died when I was eight. During the two months before her death she became slower, kinder, more forgetful. She complained that she could no longer get out of her own way, so why should she try? She just wanted to sit and remember, and she vaguely spoiled us grandchildren by allowing us to use her butter moulds to make sand cakes, her floor mats to make tents, and the fish-drying racks for almost any martial game that came into our heads.

Then one morning she was dead. Afterwards came the solemn ritual of the funeral and this time a gaunt, tall woman led the women's procession. Little Beppe lay in the black-painted oaken coffin, which was covered with a black cloth and stood on a bier. Then, when the bells started tolling, eight hefty men lifted it to their shoulders and carried it out of the house. She was a heavy woman, and the funeral procession was a very long one, and more than a hundred mourners were going to walk in it.

Because the house stood beside the cemetery in which she was going to be buried, the cortege of necessity would have to wind away from it first and all around the back streets, then through the main district, along the properly ordained Carcass Street on which our new house stood, and across the square, and up the graveyard mound. All this time the church bells tolled lugubriously slow, and the mourners kept step with their tempo. It was my first funeral, and I walked in it holding my uncle's hand, and felt terribly solemn and bereft.

The bier went first, immediately followed by our very citified minister, in high hat and long-tailed coat. Then came Pake David, then the husbands of his four daughters, then all the more distant male relatives, and finally mere friends, all walking in single file. The bier had long since turned the first corner before the women started following the long procession of men, each having a place in line according to her relationship to the dead. The women formed the really doleful part of the procession. They were draped from head to toe in their long black *lijdkleeden* (suffering shrouds) so that only their noses, and black gloved hands holding the *lijdkleeden* shut in front of their mouths gave any indication that there were human beings beneath the shrouds.

There was considerable speculation at the time as to how the new woman leader of the procession would conduct herself: whether she'd know how to keep step, how to turn, how many paces to stay behind the last man, how to keep straight in line. Among the sixty-odd women following her, it was difficult to

identify my mother, though I knew she was one of the tallest of all those walking black symbols of grief. In any case no one could find any fault with the new woman leader. The only offenders proved to be my other aunts, my father's sisters, who walked far toward the end of the cortege, since they weren't blood relatives. For the first time in the town's history, they actually dared walk in a funeral procession not covered with *lijdkleeden*, but with openwork black veils thrown loosely over their hats. My aunts, I had learned by this time, often caused consternation by wearing what were generally termed "fancy Parisian getups."

After the procession reached the graveyard, it filed three times around the mound, three times past the very window where Little Beppe's chair was still standing. The third time we climbed up the slope and stopped at the open grave, where all the anonymously shrouded women started sobbing at the minister's solemn words. I cried, too, because everybody else did, even my lightly veiled aunts. All this seemed so irrevocable, so extremely final.

A few days after the funeral I and a girl my own age found the graveyard gates open and we walked in. The grass grew lush between the old monuments, the sky was filled with scaphic white clouds floating solemnly above the dike toward the old tower. We sat down among the graves and listened to the nestling rooks and magpies in the belfry, to the laborious ticking of the old clock, to the creaking of the gilded ship weather vane on top of the tower. Suddenly I was telling the girl that this was the very afternoon when the Holy Spirit was going to descend from a cloud to lift the soul of my Little Beppe from the dark grave and carry it to heaven. She believed me readily, and within a few minutes I had even convinced myself. She asked me then whether the soul of her grandfather, who had died the previous winter, was now also going to be transported up to heaven. I solemnly vowed that this would happen, and pointed readily to a medium-sized cloud emerging from the sea over the dike. That cloud had been summoned especially to bear the Holy Spirit—a lesser one than the one which was coming to carry my Little Beppe away—who would gather up her grandfather. I told her I had to wait for a much larger, whiter and more important cloud, which had been reserved for my Little Beppe.

We sat there filled with reverent fear, watching the clouds drift closer. Then when the cloud I had designated was about to reach the spot directly above the grave of the girl's grandfather, she started trembling with terror. Suddenly clutching me, she begged me to take her away from the graveyard. By this time I was

thoroughly frightened myself and dared no longer look at the cloud; any time now the soul might start rising from the grave, and the Holy Spirit descend from the cloud; and the sight would be too terrible to see. Clutching the girl's hand, I started running toward the gate. Sobbing we ran past the sexton, into the square . . .

That evening it was rumoured about town, that a fisherman's daughter named *Engeltje* had been bewitched, and lay sick with a fever. A garland of small feathers would be laid beneath her pillow to drive the evil spirit away. I was worried. Had I perhaps provoked the spirits?

#### CHAPTER IV

### APRIL FIRST AND THE HONEY-CAKE TREE

ON THE FIRST OF APRIL, ten weeks before I reached my fifth birthday, I started school. The yearly school term always began on that date, and no matter what tomfoolery there was connected with it, it was a momentous day for me. Apart from the initiation ceremony, I was confronted with new admonitions, new cloths, and whole new set of standards.

In Wierum the school children were rather equally divided between those attending the public (old) school, and those enrolled at the special Christian school, where the Bible was taught, where the schoolmaster opened the day with prayer and closed it with thanksgiving, and where withal we learned that we were covenant children and of the elect. Naturally, there was great rivalry between the two schools, which expressed itself in street fights among the children, whenever groups from the two encountered each other. After a few preliminary words, or some stone-throwing, the fight would really start when the leader of either group tore off his wooden shoes and went to battle, with his *sabots* as weapons. All the rest followed his example, the girls as well as the boys, and frequently the battle was as bloody and as eloquent as a sortie between the Old Testament Amalekites and the children of Israel. All the strictures of our teachers and all the precepts of the New Testament were of no avail. After all we were told that the old school pupils didn't concern themselves with New Testament principles; hence they should be treated like heathens. Besides, we had as our examples those bloody battles and massacres of the Old Testament, about which we

learned every available detail in school; certainly it was more noble to be King David's Joshuas or Samsons, than to be precocious martyrs and turn our left cheeks to those Old Schoolers, who would certainly show us no mercy.

But this April first was going to be my first day of school, and all such exciting experiences as street fights still lay ahead of me. The truth is, I somewhat dreaded the great day. I wasn't yet used to the rough and tumble life of Wicrum, and I stood in tremendous awe of my future schoolmaster, who, I thought, knew everything and was going to teach me everything.

But from the first minute I got out of bed that morning, I had little time for worrying. I was scrubbed and dressed, and, after some discussion, it was decided that I'd wear wooden shoes, so as not to give offence to anyone. My two mentors had been waiting at the front door since eight o'clock, impatiently bobbing up and down the stoop. These two, boys from the highest form in school, would personally conduct me to school, and be my protectors for the first twenty-four hours, after which, even they had a perfect right to turn against me.

I still had to be measured with a chair and have the long flat honey-cake tied to my right arm. Presumably the ceremony of measuring one with a chair simply indicated that one now had attained the height of a chair—even if it was the smallest in the house—and hence was ready to start out into the world. The honey-cake was carefully wrapped in plain white paper with my name written on it, and tied to my arm with bright ribbons. That cake, I knew, would transform itself later into fruit from the honey-cake tree growing in the school attic which was always picked on the first of April.

And so with stiff right arm, because the cake was so long that I couldn't bend my elbow, off to school I went with the two older boys. I was immediately assigned a little cubicle in which to put my wooden shoes, and I remember being considerably happy that my mother had decided to let me wear them. To have entered the sacred portals of school on squeaky leather shoes (which you didn't remove like the wooden ones, so that you could sit cozily in your stocking feet) would have embarrassed me to tears.

There were fourteen of us newcomers, and we were lined up against the blackboard, while our schoolmaster assigned us our seats. There was some delay, because there were two pupils—left overs from the previous term—two lice-ridden, rickety children. They had to be kept separate from us, as the notes written by our mothers instructed the master: there should be at least one vacant desk between us precious ones and the lousy urchins. Even

I already knew that those two—who turned out to be imbeciles, and never got beyond the first form—were the progeny of poor but Christian parents, who lived in filth although they were being financially supported by the Church. Still, I too knew that it was better to have them crawling with lice and to pay for their keep at a “school with the Bible” than to banish them to the precincts of Satan, which was the public school.

We were seated according to size. The tallest in the back, one seat removed from the unwashed imbeciles, of course; and the smallest up front. I felt extremely proud on being assigned a seat just ahead of the tallest girl. Then disillusionment set in. The master asked me what my name was. I just stared at him, stunned. After all, this man was supposed to know everything, why should I have to tell him my name? I kept looking at him stubbornly, until at last he lifted my arm and read my name from the honey-cake. Never could I trust that man again, I knew.

Then all the cakes were removed from our arms and collected in a basket. Then they disappeared. Some of the higher form pupils filed in and sang some songs to us. Next our master started going through some peculiar gyrations, and one of the larger boys left the room on a secret mission; our master informed us conspiratorially that the boy had gone up to the attic to see if the honey-cake tree up there was bearing any fruit. The tree had been very slow to blossom that year, he told us, and all the elements had been against its bearing fruit, so that it might be better for us not to set our hopes too high. Whereupon the two little imbeciles broke out in loud wails and could not be consoled. Perhaps they'd already dimly anticipated that the tree wasn't due to bear fruit for them anyway, no matter what it might produce for the others.

Soon the boy returned with a favourable report: the cake tree was heavy with fruit. Our master sprang into action at once, produced a long stick, entered the clothes closet, closed the door upon himself so that we couldn't see his antics, and made a great commotion with his stick. He soon emerged, and announced that the harvest had been so great that he needed a basket. By this time of course we were too excited to sit still. Our belief in the cake tree was absolute, even though the filled basket was exactly the same one that had been carried out bearing our wrapped cakes, which were still lying in it, still wrapped. I almost forgave the master for having failed to know my name, when he handed me my cake again, and said: “Well, well, and this one is for David. It seems the man who tended the tree knew your name exactly, didn't he?”

Some other festivity was to follow, but the two imbeciles set up such a clamour because the tree hadn't borne any fruit for them that the master had to take considerable time explaining to the blubbering girl that she'd received her cake two years ago and her brother his last year. It did no good. So after some more hocus-pocus, another one of the older boys left the room, and reported several anxious minutes later that the tree had actually produced two more cakes. Small ones, and store-wrapped, but genuine enough, so that at last unanimous goodwill reigned again.

On subsequent days, I remember learning to write the letter "c," and memorizing a song which told us that Dutch children were the best on earth, and another one that said we were sailing in a little ship with Jesus at the helm. Also I remember that the fifth of thirty-two coloured lithographs hanging on the walls of our classroom represented a butcher shop, and that the intriguing central motif of it was a cow turned inside out, showing all its inner organs in proper colours and shapes. Furthermore, I was told I read too well, I shouldn't have learned it all by myself at home.

Then I got the mumps, and was out of school for several days. Later the tall girl behind me scratched me and I got blood poisoning in my right wrist, so that I couldn't write. I was also very leery of the headmaster, who reported to my father, within my hearing, that I was a very prideful boy, and that I was smart, but that such smartness was to be suspected. He had a yellow moustache, twisted like that of the Kaiser of Germany. He was so lazy he carried a stick with him to sit upon, and he had a habit of mimicking in falsetto any child who made a stupid or incorrect answer. He told my father that surely I would come to no good, and I decided privately that he must have talked to Pake David.

## CHAPTER V

### PEOPLE OF HIGH CONDUCT

BY THIS TIME we had moved into our new house, which had the highest and glossiest-blue-tiled roof in town. In fact, in several ways it was the most noticeable house in Wierum, with its smooth red brick walls and shining brown and white trimmings. We oldest boys were given a room on the second floor, a room with large windows which looked across the dike, over the



sea, at the island of Schiermonnikoog. I loved that view and that island whose name meant "Almost-a-monk's-eye." It stood for something never quite attainable, something mysterious and remote which could only be yearned for, something a little more intimate than a dream. From that window I could see the tide rolling in, I could hear its deep bass rumblings as it approached the dike, heralded by the shrill keening of terns and gulls.

Our new house had been built directly across the street from our Great Beppe's house. To make it more exciting, the street was Carcass Street (Lijk Straat) through which all the funeral processions had to pass to reach the graveyard gate. It was a street made unsafe and unholy by spirits, ghosts and spooks, the fisherfolk claimed. Hence they all shunned us after dark, and took their regular nightly walks—almost exclusively for courting purposes—through adjoining Peppermint Street. Needless to say, I saw numerous ghosts, until my parents convinced me that I hadn't. Then I suspended judgment until I saw or heard the next one. There was a convenient abandoned house at the end of the street from which a legless woman would emerge on certain occasions, return at dusk to cook something indescribable on the old hearth, and sit down to a cannibalistic meal. My fears made me see her almost as often as the fisherfolk saw her.

In the house across the street, however, lived Great Beppe who was my antidote against Pake David. With her lived our three maiden aunts and our deaf and dumb uncle. To me, all of them were very important people. I wasn't afraid of them. I couldn't be convinced that according to the town's standards they were too modish, too fancy, too hardhearted, too aloof, in fact, of altogether too high social degree and conduct. Certainly, I wasn't disturbed because my Great Beppe conducted a liquor shop, and sold gin and brandies, and other potions of the devil.

But Carcass Street was very narrow, and our windows faced each other too closely and critically to be conducive to harmony.

Great Beppe was small of stature, quick of motion, and very autocratic. Her dark eyes caught all your awkward fumbings, and her mind seemed to turn over every syllable as you spoke it, to find every possible, remote reason behind it. She fairly snapped when she spoke, and all her gestures seemed utterly final. In Wierum she was considered an aristocrat. Her family was of the best, her golden helmet—the widest and most expensive—passed from mother to daughter for many generations. And never had any of the gold been clipped off it to settle debts, as happened frequently in more fallible families. Her lace caps were of the finest, her taffeta dresses rustled more than any others, the clasps

of her psalmbooks were gold, her snuff box gold, and the handles of the foot stove she carried to church were of the best burnished copper. And she was unafraid.

I don't know if I loved her; I simply had a great deal of respect for her. Also I knew that I was quite at fault in preferring my haughty Great Beppe to my exemplary Pake David. My reasons for this and my feelings about it were very involved, especially since I felt disloyal to my mother, who seldom saw eye to eye with Great Beppe. They were so volubly critical of each other. Beppe of course was domineering, and saw to it that she ruled whatever her snapping eyes surveyed. I had no right taking her side against my mother. I wouldn't have but for Pake David. Then there was the ever-recurrent suggestion that my father might have married somewhat beneath him. It was all very elusive and vague, but I couldn't help feeling the undercurrent.

Judging by Frisian standards, my grandmother and her four daughters and three sons, including my father, were of small stature. In Wierum they were considered mere imps, what with their dark hair, dark eyes and aquiline noses. After we'd moved to America, however, I remember my mother's saying to my father one bright Sunday after church: "Why, you're not such a small man after all. Or have you grown since we came to America? Or are the people smaller here, or do the high buildings dwarf them, or? . . ." Father was merely five feet, ten inches tall.

Great Beppe and her unmarried children lived in a rather nondescript house. It has a white picket fence in front, which hemmed in an always-changing display of snowdrops, freesias, peonies, tulips, iris, roses, and other flowers impossible to describe by any English names. There was a short flag walk leading up to an imposing door, and above that door hung a discreet sign which read: *Vergunning*. That meant that liquor could be bought on the premises, and that caused great consternation in the family. Great Beppe, however, had decided that she needed consolation and diversion when her husband died. So she sold liquor to men whom she covertly and even openly censured for squandering their hard-earned money, and to tippling women whom she despised even more, but treated according to their financial status in town.

None of her children approved of the *Vergunning*. My three unmarried aunts, who were the fashion arbiters of town, and who accordingly conducted themselves as perfect ladies, completely shunned their mother's drinking place. They used the front door only on Sundays when the liquor shop was closed.

I liked my aunts. They had about them an aura of remoteness

from which they could graciously unbend. Furthermore, they had high social ambitions, which could never be realized in our remote little town. They acted enigmatically for reasons all their own, and so were unpopular. They were invariably the last to arrive in church Sundays, and while the minister waited, they swept imperiously to their conspicuous front pew, wearing their newest creations, so that the worshippers could judge and misjudge them with ease. Their pew was a select one, flanking the "square" in which the elders and deacons sat just beneath the high funnel of the pulpit with the sky-blue sounding board above it.

The house was long, rambling, and always in a state of being remodelled. In one end my deaf and dumb uncle had his quarters, but my aunts seemed to be everywhere, fairly wafted about upon the scent of lavender. No doubt the latter was meant to drown out the liquor odours emanating from the front. Perhaps, too, the house was designed haphazardly so that the female liquor trade could slip in unobtrusively through side doors and back alleys, and slink out again with bottles hidden in their muffs or voluminous pockets.

We children were expected to enter the house through the large workshop in the back, where Father's carpenters were usually busy constructing coffins, sills, rowboats, anything small enough to be built inside. Though father was the managing head of the old business, Great Beppe remained the titular one, and she brought pressure to bear in her own fashion.

People said she was a cold, calculating, ruthless woman. Perhaps she was. Whenever she displayed affection, she seemed to be doing it with a guilty conscience. She was unpredictable. Frequently she would send me on an errand which took half a day, to reward me with a mere halfpenny. On other occasions she would dig deep in the large embroidered purse she wore strung around her waist and press a whole gulden on me. Or rather, she might say brusquely: "Here, do you want this?" And when I was caught off guard, and didn't have a ready answer she'd say: "Well, I guess you don't. I guess you're wiser than the old woman," and she'd drop it in her purse again.

She tolerated no deviations, no rationalizations, no excuses, nothing oblique, certainly nothing meretricious. She underfed her family, declaring that a bunch of such small stature needed only half of what other people ate. Two of her daughters were anæmic, but she blamed that on their interest in things Parisian. When the doctor ordered them to drink milk, she went out and bought a cow, and was ready to establish it in the ménage, till the combined efforts of her family, neighbours and Church dissuaded her.

One day, when my seventh birthday was approaching, she emerged unexpectedly from her *Vergunning* and said laconically to me over her white wicket: "I'm giving you an accordion for your birthday. There's music in you."

If there was music in me, I got little chance to let it out. The accordion was mine, but she played it, and never seemed to get around to teaching me, as she had promised she would.

Great Beppe from her windows would watch peddlers and itinerant salesmen come to our house. After all, ours was the newest and nicest house in town, and tradesmen made a beeline for it. Besides, Mother always was a great bargain driver. When, however, too much bargaining went on to suit Great Beppe, she'd come marching across the street to put her oar in. She was an inveterate speculator. The net result was that she'd try to out-bargain my mother, and would triumphantly snatch real prizes away from her. Then they wouldn't be on speaking terms for some days, and Mother would grimly send all salesmen across the street to Beppe's house, where the bargaining would then ensue with reverse results. That way peace would be re-established, or enmity shifted to a different plane.

Among all these haughty women lived my poor Uncle Meindert. Some violent sickness had robbed him of speech and hearing when he was four years old. He and Father spoke to each other in sign language, but there was no one else in town who could. Uncle Meindert was an excitable man, not always too stable emotionally. His somewhat eccentric behaviour was meat for the superstitious fisherfolk, who had some silly notion that being deaf and dumb was a sign that you harboured a devil inside. It said so in the Bible! They would tease him, throw stones at him, set their dogs after him, or drop heavy objects just behind him on the pavement. When they saw him jump, they were privately convinced that he wasn't deaf in the least. Besides, they took childish delight in hearing him grunt out his inarticulate, staccato protests.

He was a very lonely man. Many times would I cross the street to play dominoes and Halma with him evenings. It upset him to lose, however. Gradually, too, he was teaching me his sign language, so that my visits became more satisfactory. I loved those quiet evenings in that large house, with seldom a word spoken. The only sound would be the almost human sputterings of the little benzene flame beneath the teapot. From time to time Great Beppe would make a clipped remark, and her three daughters would answer briefly. Occasionally they'd all go into ecstasies over some new dress pattern. Or sometimes unexpected suitors would present themselves. Then the suitor and whichever

aunt he was calling upon would remove themselves to the little red-plush room at the end of the hall. Those who remained behind would be consumed with unspoken curiosity. From time to time one of them would tiptoe down the long hall, and come back to the room with significant gestures and glances. It was a house of silent gestures, brief replies, muted assertions. "They are even too proud to use words," the villagers used to say.

Sometimes a suitor would call who was considered too low socially. He would be kept standing in the room till at a conclusive gesture of Great Beppe he would follow her out to her bar, where she would give him a drink or two and usher him out. My aunts would look resignedly at each other, smile wry smiles and wait for their mother's return. Great Beppe would come back silently, sniff brusquely at her eau-de-cologne snuff-box, pour another cup of tea, and the whole matter would be dismissed as negligible.

Once my uncle somehow learned that there was a deaf and dumb girl staying in a town several miles away. One morning, dressed in his Sunday best, he mounted his bicycle, and without disclosing his destination to anyone, started out. When he returned, he announced in writing and in gestures that he'd found the girl he wanted to marry, and that nothing would stop him. But Great Beppe and my aunts did stop him, and as a result my father had to set out on his bicycle on an unpleasant journey to the girl's house. That was because Father was now the official head of the house, also the guardian of his oldest brother, I gathered.

My uncle Meindert sat down in a corner and wept. He made awful, despairing noises in his mute throat. He gesticulated frantically, and from time to time he'd go pacing up and down the hall like a caged tiger. Then he'd sag down in his own reed chair again, and sob helplessly. It was the first time I'd seen a grown man cry, and it made me feel horrible, and rebellious. But I knew that Great Beppe had spirited his bicycle away, and that I had no right to support him or even to sympathize with him. Finally, I tried to console him by putting the checkerboard between us. Sobbing more loudly, he only shoved it aside, and I had to run to the high green dike to keep from crying, too. There I sat among the pink and white oxalis daisies that matted the dike, between all the gambolling, yellow-white lambs. Because it was spring. And because in spring. . . .

Great Beppe, looking up from her back stoop and seeing me on the dike, gazed long and steadily at me. She fingered her purse tentatively, but suddenly she marched back into the house. A

few minutes later my aunts emerged from the house, and in new riding costumes and pastel veils they rode forth on their bicycles between the blossoming fields. Perhaps to find surcease from what they had done to their poor mute brother.

## CHAPTER VI

### THOUGH THE ICE BE THIN

THE NEXT WINTER I had to learn to skate; it was a social, patriotic, almost sacred obligation in our province. I had reached the ripe age of five and a half, and soon my bones would be hardening, my muscles becoming set, my spirit quieting down. As yet no one even knew whether I was to be the victim of that most humiliating of all afflictions—weak ankles. If so, that meant that I would have to stand by on the side lines, or hide myself all the rest of my life, while everybody in town from four to eighty disported themselves wildly on the ice.

That year the ice was slow in forming. Winter came capriciously, flawed the canals with a few ice feathers, and departed. Then at last there was an unbroken crust, practically an inch thick, and yes, it held one of the town's smaller dogs without breaking. We prayed ardently that night. And the next morning the ice was a bit thicker, almost strong enough to hold a score of boys who dared to walk out upon it, separately of course, though each one broke through at one point. Still, if one assumed that the ice froze more solidly all the time, it was no more than logical to keep testing it every thirty minutes or so. Each time, however, the experimenter broke through, and each time he would have to be carried home to his mother, drenched and shivering, while all the rest of us children would parade behind him, bellowing and screaming a senseless ditty, which was supposed to express the depths of derision: "*Een snoek, een snoek, en water in de broek.*" Translated literally it meant nothing more than: "A pickerel, a pickerel, and water in his pants."

Then that promising crust of ice completely disappeared, and the canals lay open again. The water was reported to be extra brackish that winter, because the North Sea sluices had to be opened so frequently. So school continued relentlessly, and it actually began to look as if winter would end without any ice holiday, which in any Frisian boy's opinion is tantamount to hell

on earth. After all, we went to school fifty weeks a year, six days a week, and only had two vacations of a week's duration each. During the first one, according to good Dutch custom, the school was scrubbed and scoured inside and out. The second, in August, was necessary to prepare us and the school itself for Queen Wilhelmina's birthday celebration. But there was always an extra allowance made for the ice holiday, which lasted as long as the ice was strong enough to be skated upon, a period seldom longer than two weeks. It was fortunate that it was so short, for while it lasted all schools and shops were closed; in fact, all but the most necessary labours were suspended, and men, women and children spent every waking hour on the ice.

At last, late in January, suddenly in one night a nice two-inch floor of ice formed upon the canals. That morning I walked triumphantly to school bearing a note from my father which informed my teacher in so much formal Dutch that now the ice was strong enough for skating, and that it would not only be foolish, but downright cruel to keep me in school. Since at least three-quarters of the other pupils carried similar notes, and the other one quarter had simply stayed at home, there was little the man could do but declare the ice holiday official, especially for us little ones. The older classes were also dismissed, but with a severe warning not to go on the ice till afternoon.

In the meanwhile Father had decided that my younger brother should learn to skate the same time I did. What with the lateness of the season, he had already attained the skateable age of four years and thirty-eight days. Father announced this so solemnly that we understood that it was a weighty decision, ushering in a momentous occasion. We knew that Father had the reputation of being one of the three fastest skaters in town, so that much family honour was at stake.

Father took us to a shallow moat skirting the back districts of town, where all the novices had to prove themselves before they were allowed to go on the main canal. Proudly we carried our first pair of skates, brand new, varnished, and with the best possible steel runners set in solid oak frames, so that they would last us at least three or four years. Naturally, we wore leather shoes; to skate on wooden shoes is an impossibility, as any boy could tell you, pointing out at the same time why the book *Hans Brinker* is in so many ways erroneous.

Now came a problem. The ice on the moat wasn't nearly strong enough to hold Father, lightweight adult though he was. And one of the three methods of learning to skate he condemned unconditionally. This was the method which some fifteen novices

were already practising on the moat; pushing themselves along behind old kitchen chairs. It was from beginning to end the wrong technique, Father instructed us. You simply became habitual skidders, and you stooped, whereas an upright posture was of prime importance in skating. The most approved method would be for him to tow us on a rope, but this was made impossible by the thinness of the ice. Because of that, we were ordered not to skate too closely together. As we could see, there was a perceptible bending of the ice floor wherever two or three children gathered together, and though the moat wasn't deep, it was almost as foolish to get half drowned as to get drowned completely. Father simply advised us to go out on to the ice, strike out with our feet, each one separately, of course, and convince ourselves we had no business being horizontal with the moat. Judging by the struggles of all the novices there, that might be a difficult achievement, and being a moderately sensitive and perhaps too imaginative lad, I suddenly felt all my courage slipping away from me.

Father was shrewd, however; he told my four-year-old brother to start out first. In all his little life my brother had never shown the slightest fear of anything; human, subhuman, or even superhuman, beasts or things material or spiritual. Father must have known that I was long since resigned to my brother's superiority, so he merely admonished me: "Now, David, just watch your brother. He'll go wild, and he'll fall a hundred times, but then he'll be skating. So just don't do what he does when he does all the spilling and falling."

With complete disregard for danger, my brother Rem leaped on the ice, made frantic, fowl-like motions with all his limbs at once, fell and nearly cracked his skull a dozen times, became covered with snow and speckled with broken reeds, yelled and shrieked, but after ten minutes of wild gyrations, started skating. Five minutes later he was outskating everybody on the moat. "Well, David," Father said, "that's how you do it. Only you can skip his preliminaries. After all, you two aren't the same by any means. So on the ice you go."

I fell at once. But I collided with the ice much more circumspectly than my brother had; and it hadn't cracked beneath me as I imagined it would. I fell a dozen times, stood clutching the brittle reeds despairingly for another five minutes, then found myself sliding and in need of some sort of motions to keep upright and to avoid the other strugglers, and lo, I was skating! It was tremendous, a veritable miracle. Of course, it would take me another four hours to achieve what my brother was doing now,



but for me this was a wonderful start. Scornfully I looked at my rivals scratching ignominiously along behind their painted chairs, but when I looked back at my father for approbation, I saw him merely move his head in brusque approval, much as Great Beppe would have done. Then he waved an equally brisk good-bye, and started out for home. Of course, we knew we weren't allowed to leave the ice until time for the noonday meal. But my fate was sealed; I was a skater.

Just before noon Father appeared again to study our progress. My brother had long since forsaken the shallow moat and was skating fledgling-like over much more exciting canals and ditches. And though I had obediently stuck to the moat, I couldn't help but notice how pleased my father was with my brother. He had reservations about me: "If David catches up with you this afternoon," he promised Rem, "you can both go to the big canal to-morrow morning. We'll all go, the whole family. The temperature is still dropping."

After lunch we were immediately ordered back to the ice again. By evening Father came to study our prowess once more. There was nothing to say about my four-year-old brother: he had simply outgrown the moat. To me Father said earnestly: "I can see you'll never make a speed skater, you haven't the abandon. But you'll be a beautiful skater, your strokes are firm and easy. Well, to-morrow to the big canal we go. . . ."

Practically at dawn we boys were on the canal harbour. Father and Mother would follow later, when the most necessary work was done. We had been ordered to stay on the comparatively safe harbour mouth, beside the canal boats moored there. Naturally, my brother struck out for wider and more adventurous spaces at once. But I obeyed the letter of the law. I made one grave error, however. While I was skating there among children a bit older than I, some of these banded together to criticize my slow-tempered strokes. I stopped in front of them, and quoted, without mentioning my father as my authority: "I know I'll never make a speed skater, because I haven't the abandon. But I'll be a beautiful skater." Painfully I realized that that hadn't been the correct thing to say. After that I was nicknamed "the beautiful skater." And wherever I went, I'd hear "beautiful skater" shouted after me. But I was only five and hadn't yet learned that a simple expression of naïve faith is more reprehensible than any vain boasting, or having smallpox or lice.

## CHAPTER VII

### FOR WHOM THE SEA WAS MADE

IT IS TIME TO DESCRIBE the fisherfolk who gave our town its atmosphere. Wierum was democratic, bizarre, medieval, and nearly always exciting. It was the fisherfolk who made it so, they who formed sixty per cent of our population, considered everybody's joys and sorrows public property, and had little patience with false dignity or fancy manners. They did stand in awe of God, who controlled the sea, and of the Son of God, who had walked upon its waves, but they also did abject and oblique homage to all the devils, spooks, witches and spirits whom they considered capable of undoing God's good work.

They were intensely nationalistic, and though utterly democratic in their own behaviour, staunch supporters of the House of Orange and any nationalistic conservative party. Personally, however, they seldom bothered to go to the polls to vote. They claimed to belong to the sea, and the sea in turn to them; whatever went on on the land was of secondary importance. Also, they hated the British with an undying hatred, because they had come with their steam-propelled vessels and depleted their fishing grounds. Even as recently as two generations ago, a fleet of at least fifty fishing sloops used to sail out daily from Wierum into the North Sea. Now only three vessels constituted the entire local fishing fleet. The British had come to within a few miles of our shores, into the very spawning grounds, and cleaned out all the fish. In the end the Government had protested, but rather apologetically, and altogether too late; Wierum and the other fishing towns of northern Friesland were already in economic ruin. For several years the fishing folk were on the verge of starvation. The Boer War, of course, had added to the anti-British feeling, which even now was fostered from the pulpit and in our schools, and in our "Christian" fiction, of which perhaps eighty per cent dealt with the Boer War exclusively. Any attempt to introduce English in our schools met with failure. Other schools in towns the size of Wierum taught *the* three languages: French, German and English, even in their primary grades. In Wierum we would have nothing to do with anything foreign.

After the British, "we" (the townfolk, as influenced by the fisherfolk) hated the Germans most. When their fisheries were ruined, many of our seamen hired themselves out on German fishing fleets. Naturally, they scorned all work on the soil; nor was there any soil available, since for centuries it had been parcelled out among the landlubbers. Germany was nearby, the wages were high, and once they'd got the habit, all able-bodied fishermen from twelve up booked themselves early each May on fleets sailing from Emden, Bremen and Hamburg. They'd fish in the North Sea and the northern Atlantic until the following December. No sooner were the men gone, than their women would also start out for Germany to work as cleaners and dressers of fish.

No wonder that in May Wierum seemed a deserted town. This was also the busy season for field work, so that only a handful of tradesmen, children and old people remained behind. All the old fishwives would make hourly excursions to the dike, especially if the weather wasn't quite perfect, to scan the horizon anxiously. They'd stand there atop the dike with their hands shadowing their eyes, like black statues around which the sheep grazed undisturbed. Many of them were redoubtable weather prophets, and prognosticators of all sorts of evil times to come. Wierum had a great number of such widows, and each year new ones were added, as each season the sea claimed more men. During a March snowstorm, at the turn of the century, twenty-seven of Wierum's fishing sloops had capsized, and all men aboard had perished. This created a special class of widows, highly respected, and especially well versed in the ways of weather and winds. Even though the town itself might be depopulated, the dike was always well studded with the black-clad widows.

If possible, just before the Feast of Sint Nikolaas on the sixth of December, the men and women would return from Germany again, their pockets jangling with coins, their bodies decked in their own peculiar type of finery, their sentiments and voices stronger than ever. Then the town would stay awake all through the nights, and music and singing would pour from all the inns and drinking places. They returned, however, with all their political, economic and religious views unchanged, hating the Germans because they'd been forced to accept them as masters, and contrariwise, loving our Queen and the House of Orange all the more immoderately.

From the fisherfolk all the rest of the populace took its cues. They too were democratic, conservative, and nationalistic, though more sober and self-contained. Apart from a few excep-

tions at the top and bottom of the scale, the actual social range of our town was so small that either microscopic study or downright snobbery were necessary to make an issue of it. Half the townfolk belonged to the old State Church, the Reformed Church. The other half worshipped at the Gereformeerde (reformed, by actual translation) Church, a more Calvinistically pure offshoot of the former. To the latter Church my parents belonged. There were seven or eight families in town who believed in some sort of evangelism of their own, and there were perhaps twenty agnostics who didn't go to church at all.

The scant dozen socialists in town were treated with disdain, though nobody really thought about them except during election periods. Even though the great Dutch socialist leader, Troelstra, hailed from a town only six miles away, the Wierumers would have none of him. In this respect, too, our town differed radically from the thirty-odd towns round about us, where the ratio of conservatives and old-line Calvinists to socialists and agnostics was often fifty-fifty.

There wasn't a Jew in town, or if there was, he'd been so well assimilated, that nobody suspected it. There wasn't even one Roman Catholic. And imbued as we were with Dutch history, especially with that period dealing with the Dutch war of independence from Spain, with William the Silent on one hand, and Philip II, the Duke of Alba, and the Spanish Inquisition on the other, it was no wonder that for a long time I imagined all Catholics had cloven hoofs. Once I visited an uncle in a neighbouring town for the express purpose of seeing the Roman Catholic family which lived next door. To my grievous disappointment, these were tall blond Frisians like us, and there wasn't a cloven hoof, a forked tail or a set of horns anywhere in evidence among them. I hadn't quite believed my mother, when she'd told me that as a child in Groningen I'd many a time been patted on the head by sentimental Catholic neighbours with no ill effect whatsoever. The fisherfolk, however, were all so uniformly Calvinists—though rather bizarre and emotional ones—that they abhorred the Germans especially because they were Lutherans, even though we were taught respect for Luther and his Reformation in our very school.

Life in Wierum was exciting, and the town itself was coloured by age and tradition, even though it had acquired considerable notoriety for drunkenness, street-fighting, and other violent behaviour not approved of in the inland towns. The fisherfolk were responsible for that. If any swain from a neighbouring village came to court a fisherman's daughter, all the young un-

married fishermen in town would set upon him, usher him to the outer bridge, and if he still remained firm in his purpose, thrash him within an inch of his life and leave him half submerged in the canal. They intermarried so much that everybody was everybody else's cousin, niece, or nephew, and when one of the fisherfolk died, practically everyone took part in the funeral procession as a blood relative. I might add that among the fisherfolk there were few evidences of insanity, imbecility, or congenital diseases, all expectations notwithstanding.

Their courting followed an unvarying pattern. The young men, two by two, paraded around town clockwise, starting from their own borough, then going through Peppermint Street, across the square, hurriedly past the ever-haunted graveyard, along the back districts, past the outer canal, down the main street and into Peppermint Street again. There they couldn't help jostling the young women parading counterclockwise, because that street was barely wide enough to allow three people to walk abreast, especially since the stoops jutted well out into the street and were often lined with rows of wooden shoes.

They considered it off-colour, almost immoral, to take any of the girls from their regular route down a side street. A suitor simply made a brief pause for conversation, sometimes offered the girl a drink from his liquor bottle—the boldest and most sought-after girls accordingly carried little shot-glasses with them—then set a date, and at the agreed evening and time appeared at the girl's house with a full bottle of anisette, the approved courting drink.

He'd then join the family, treat all the grown members to a drink, and if he was deemed worthy of their daughter, the parents would assign him a place at the hearth, and help him finish most of the bottle. After that they'd retire, and leave the daughter—and the remaining anisette—to carry on from there at her own discretion. If they didn't approve of the would-be suitor, they'd simply refuse his drink and there would be nothing for him to do but take leave at once. Sexual relationships before marriage were frowned upon, however, and in this respect the morals of the fisherfolk were considerably better than those of the landlubbers. Of course, the land workers were more frequently thrown together in the fields, especially during the romantic summer months when the fisherfolk were at sea.

Apart from the constant courting parades, the fishing folk had a jolly time, drinking much and gambling some, because they had so much idleness on their hands, so much pent-up deviltry in their blood, and so much new-earned money in their pockets. It

was no wonder that Wierum was called "The Town That Never Sleeps." During late winters, life at midnight was considerably higher than at noon. During such periods it was diplomatic to fraternize with the fishing folk; they took advantage of any slight to wreak upon you their particular and primitive brand of collective vengeance.

All through the day you could find them anywhere but in their gaudy houses. They crowded the dike steps, they collected in noisy groups on street corners, they filled the inns. Seldom did they rove beyond the confines of town; they hated the sight of any cultivated land, any proof that man had grovelled in the soil. Their own houses were clustered closely together, with several families living under one roof, and around the houses all vegetation was scoured and plucked away. Whatever love they had for plants was efficiently taken care of by the inevitable pots of red geraniums in their windows. For the rest they strewn sea shells over their small patches of ground. For some reason they were suspicious of dogs and seldom owned one. They all possessed sleek cats, even though cats were believed to be the companions of witches. But their witches came from among their own folk, too. They were the special children of God, hence the devil snatched off special prizes from their midst.

It was a merry month, December, when all the fisherfolk were back. When we children came from school, we'd have to push our way through groups of brawny men, dressed invariably in brown suede trousers, blue pomponed jerseys, yellow painted wooden shoes, and stocking caps of various loud colours. They'd always insist on treating us poor youngsters, who'd been confined to the stuffy schoolrooms so many hours, to all sorts of forbidden dainties, sometimes even gin or brandy. Their short-skirted, tall women would look on, make some customary fuss over us, and then take part in the mischief. The married ones—dressed in yards of bright cloth earned in Germany—would shout their approval from their half-doors and stoops. Any stranger passing their way would be duly stopped, questioned about his state of health, his business, and about his purpose in our town. Then he might be invited in for a drink, or even for a meal, and if he could sing a song or play some sort of musical instrument, so much the better. If he acted secretive or reluctant to accept their hospitality, however, it was better for him to leave Wierum at once.

Sometimes the fisherfolk would concern themselves volubly with America, that never-never land, where everybody was expansive and generous, but where there was no sea. There was no

use trying to explain to them that there was more to America than Michigan, Illinois and Wisconsin. No one had ever gone to America to resume his fishing trade, hence it must be impossible to fish there. The fishing folk looked upon anyone migrating to America with special sorrow, weeping genuine tears and muttering disconsolately about being "buried alive." Of course, those that did go there got rich promptly, and might even marry Negroes, own automobiles and chew their daily potatoes with golden teeth. But even all that wasn't enough of an inducement. Why, America wasn't even flat! It was full of heaps and crooks and hills and wrinkles. It didn't matter that the fisherfolk themselves hated all land; at least, the flat land around Wierum was sure enough evidence that once it had been sea bottom.

## CHAPTER VIII

### WE HOARY PAGANS

ALTHOUGH WE ATTENDED the Christian school, where every subject taught was aligned with Calvinistic principles, and where the teaching of God's Word was all important, we children took great pride in the fact that "we Frisians" had been among the last of the European pagans to be converted to Christianity. Best of all, we stubborn heathens had massacred the great St. Boniface and all his followers only a few miles from our town. And "our" Frisian women still wore the golden helmet to commemorate the scalping of a Frisian princess by a Christian conqueror. The free Frisian women, as evidence of their loyalty and defiance, had immediately shaved off their own golden locks, and started wearing golden helmets in emulation of their princess.

Yes, we had been a barbaric, wild and unconquerable crowd. Even the Romans had dubbed us Free Frisians. And we'd been right here on the spot long before the Saxons had come out of eastern Germany, to pass by us on their way to Great Britain, wisely leaving us unmolested, because we were older and freer and not to be meddled with. We weren't in the least surprised to learn from our history books that even our Queen Wilhelmina was part Frisian. When the royal house of Holland had exhausted itself, it had taken an infusion of royal Frisian blood to keep it royal at all. And though ours was not at all the most populous and wealthy of Holland's eleven provinces, we Frisians were the

hoariest and the most independent of the races under the Dutch banner. We had a distinct language of our own, actually pre-dating Dutch itself.

It was foolish to send teachers to our schools who knew no Frisian. Dutch had to be taught to us as an alien tongue. We learned it in school, we listened to it in church, we read it in our newspapers and books, we spoke it to God. Naturally, Dutch was the language of heaven and God Himself, since after all, in the end the Christians had conquered us—though by wiles and false promises, let it be known. So let our dominies speak Dutch, and if they came from the south of Holland, let them condemn our ways of life, even our skating. However, we interpreted God's commands in our own fashion, and could be dictated to just so far.

In the centre of the main street of Wierum stood an old house, built there by one of the disciples of St. Boniface, an early British missionary. We took it for granted, but historians didn't. And there was the old church and the old tower, the earliest history of which had not yet been investigated, though the tower, at least, was rumoured to be the most ancient in the country. The Romans, during the invasions, had considered Wierum important enough to raise battlements and fortresses around it, and these were now being excavated—somewhat furtively, because the townfolk objected to having their gardens and meadows and their revered, although forgotten dead turned into heaps of rubble, just for the unearthing of a few very old and worn crocks, idols, swords, and pots and pans.

Sometime around the year 1000, Wierum had been an extensive inland city, as was still evident from the old foundations beyond the dike, in the sea. Sometime after that approximate date, a great deluge had swept over the land, drowning from 200,000 to 300,000 Frisians. Then the sea had established its boundaries where Wierum's old tower was now standing with its foundations embedded in the dike, a dike built on top of old foundations, old streets and old graves.

All this was extremely important to me; a matter of great personal pride. Imagine then my excitement when our little Christian provincial newspaper, which never in all its history had been known to have had an illustration on its front page, came out with a photograph of Wierum's old tower and church, proclaiming them the oldest in the land, and trying to prove by some haphazard and questionable dates how old its oldest walls, gables and foundation stones were. My pride knew no bounds. It happened on one of those days when some peculiarly chronic illness



had kept me home from school. Nothing would do but that I rise from my bed of pain, carrying the newspaper with me, and march to my father and all his carpenters, and then to school to show the article to my schoolmaster. He only saw proof in it that I wasn't sick at all, and that my excitement over the old church was just one of my peculiar aberrations.

Naturally, the newspaper account made a great deal of the low, bricked-in gate in the northern wall of the church, which it considered irrefutable proof that the church had been standing during the invasions of the Vikings. At that time the Frisians had already adopted Christianity, and stubbornly as they did everything. Consequently they proved a hard nut to crack for the fierce Norsemen, who forbade them to worship the Biblical Jehovah, and forced them to do homage to Wotan and Thor once more, as they had done in previous centuries. In spite of numerous executions, the Norsemen failed, but they were not yet to be outdone. They closed up the regular entrances of the church, and constructed one very low gate in the north wall, so that the worshippers had to bow to the north every time they left the church. The old Frisians simply met the challenge by backing out of the church, insulting the northern gods by showing them their posteriors. This supposedly caused them a few thousand more executions. Of course, after the Norsemen were driven from the land, the low gate was bricked in again, but the evidence of it remained, and was clearly noticeable.

Young as I was, my indignation was among the strongest in the town, when we learned that behind all this sudden publicity about the church lay the gross intentions on the part of the church's wardens to tear down the old draughty, crumbling edifice and replace it with something "orthodoxly modern." Since my parents and grandparents had years ago left the old church when the new (Gereformeerde) was established, I was soon told that my concern about the old church was decidedly amiss, even though history and Wierum's fame might be at stake. I was forced henceforth, and clandestinely, to limit myself to reading about the controversies between national historical societies and the church governors.

Naturally, as such things will, it all ended in a compromise. Since the old square tower, which was unmistakably pre-Gothic, was several hundred years older than the church, it was decided to leave that intact. But the church with all its old graves, vaults, and the Viking door was to be torn down and another built upon its exact foundations, so as not to disturb the graves in the cemetery mound. It was going to be a very imposing edifice, since

the Government and the historical societies had contributed aplenty, for the sake of keeping the old tower intact.

And so during the coming year our old tower was to be united in holy bonds with a new upstart of a church auditorium. Then suddenly a new controversy arose. Should the new and modern gilded ship weather vane remain on top of the old tower, or should the old one be repaired and mounted there again? The old one was definitely of more historical value, since some bygone knight had brought it back with him from one of the Crusades and presented it to the town. Some claimed it had originally come from Egypt, others from Dalmatia. It had lain in the dungeon of the old tower for half a century, where everybody had forgotten about it, except the occasional drunkard or vagrant who got locked in there overnight. Of course, the main trouble was that the thing weighed a couple of tons, and might almost flatten the tower if it were placed on top of it again. That controversy, too, came to nothing in the end.

Something much more immediately important came up next. One evening our town crier announced all over town that none other than our own mother had solicited and got the job of bell-ringer for the town, at a salary of fifty gulden a year. This was the first we children knew of it, and it impressed us tremendously. It meant that Mother would ring the big old bell each day at eight in the morning, at noon, and again at six in the evening to summon the field-workers back to town. "It's only a matter of pulling a rope for five minutes, three times a day," Mother shrugged, when we came running home to verify what the town crier had announced. "I know it's a heavy bell, but ringing it is just a trick."

Unlike the legendary Wierum bell-ringer, who had also been a woman, she turned down the suggestion of making a swing out of the bell rope so that she could swing herself in comfort while she tolled the bell. "I know my station in life," Mother said with what I thought was marvellous dignity, especially since I knew that her former colleague had been of the tipping kind, who would occasionally rock herself into a stupor and so keep on clanging the bell for the thirty minutes or more allowed only for funerals, alarms and the Queen's birthday.

"But you must be careful," an old master bell-ringer admonished her, wagging his impressive beard. "You are so frail, and the tug of that bell is so strong, once it starts ringing, that it may sweep you up toward the ceiling."

Even though we boys accompanied her willingly the first ten times or so, we never saw this hilarious catastrophe happen to her.

We got no chance to dislodge her from the ceiling, where supposedly she'd lodge "like a squashed fly." Our mother rang the bell with such dignity that we lost all interest in it. So, knowing that she could not leave the rope once she'd started ringing, we took advantage of her inability to follow us by exploring the tower's dark upper levels, coming back from our expeditions with fledgling crows for pets, and weird curios with which to tantalize our schoolmates.

Occasionally she pretended to forget us and leave us shut up there, giving us a few agonizing minutes. Once, however, we turned the tables on her with spectacular results. Rem and I were on the fourth dark level when the bell stopped tolling. We decided to take hold of the rope and surprise our mother by continuing the ringing, but no sooner had Rem grabbed hold of the still swinging rope than it swept him up to the ceiling. Fortunately, instead of being bashed against the old oaken rafters there, his head got stuck in the bell-rope hole. Horrified, I set up a great outcry, which of course was completely drowned by the old seven-foot-thick walls. At last, Rem managed to let go of the rope, and down he plummeted, but the released rope started clanging the bell so wildly, raising such a ruckus among the tower's colonies of rooks, crows and magpies that the countryfolk started running to town, thinking it was some sort of dire alarm. Mother almost lost her job that time, and after that we were kept outside the graveyard gates.

Only on one occasion did our mother fail to ring the bell. It happened on my seventh birthday. One mid-morning the sky became a cauldron of whirling clouds, edged everywhere by violent lightning. Mother was urged to hurry to the tower and summon everybody home for whatever God had in store for us; certainly it was better to perish beneath the familiar red roofs than in the open fields. But the alarm proved to be unnecessary, as already all the field-workers were streaming back to town along all the four roads leading home.

All the womenfolk thereupon scurried to our school, which stood just outside of town, and demanded that our masters let us children go, which they readily did as the sky by now was a churning, sulphuric yellow, filled with a peculiar hissing and roaring sound, and all of us had been sitting stunned and baffled in school, anyway.

We were no sooner home than the storm broke in all its fury. It lasted all that day and the next and till the evening of the third day, with never a let-up in the lightning. Everything smelled of sulphur, and a thick pall of fumes lay close over the roofs and

between the houses. People only a mile or so from home had to stay where they were, and when the storm at last subsided, and we climbed atop the dike to watch it disappear to sea, we could count twenty-eight fires burning in the flat land with its two score villages.

For those three days we hadn't been to bed at all, and naturally Mother hadn't rung the bell, although the letter of the law required that it should be tolled in all weathers. "It would have been tempting God to visit us with still greater wrath," Mother told the people on the dike that evening, and everyone agreed so wholeheartedly with her that it almost seemed they might present her with a medal for not ringing that bell during those dreadful days.

But to me she said: "This is the greatest birthday gift you could have received; that we were all saved so miraculously." I was considerably impressed that Providence had taken such cognizance of my personal birthday. On the other hand, I soon started wondering whether the storm hadn't come as a special visitation upon me for some sin I had committed. Could it be because I had been on a cat chase with Rem, and had actually struck one old tomcat with a stone? Or because I had caught some frogs and put them in a cigar box, where I'd promptly forgotten them and let them die? Cats and frogs controlled the weather, the superstitious fisherfolk professed to believe. At any rate, I had reached the age of seven during all this turmoil. And ever after I've stood in dread of thunder and lightning.

## CHAPTER IX

### MY BROTHER REMMEREN

**D**URING THOSE YEARS I kept a diary, but the main trouble with it was that it wasn't secret. It was open to family inspection, suggestions and censure. So it recorded little but the state of the weather, the prolific whelpings of rabbits and guinea-pigs, the deaths of several pet crows, my marks for schoolwork, and the texts of the Sunday sermons. Some time in my seventh year it came to an abrupt stop after an honest recording of a severe bellyache brought on by the eating of stolen turnips.

Of course, the diary was illustrated, but the illustrations were strictly Biblical or historical. Each day, too, I drew in it with

wax crayons a new design for wall paper—I can't remember what led me to attempt this—and on each page was pasted a different kind of cigar band. There was considerably more to life than my diary seemed to indicate, and my piety and morality couldn't have been as perfect as my own daily record would have it. Still, it was perhaps the best possible diary I could produce under the circumstances.

Perhaps the one person who figured most importantly in my life at the time was my brother Rem. His full name, naturally, was Remmeren, like my father's and grandfather's, a name which supposedly had been in the family since before the Spanish Inquisition. Rem was my bodyguard, my champion, my warrior, but in general my ward. He was also a considerable problem to anyone who dealt with him, because he was afraid of nothing but book learning. Besides fighting his own and the town's battles—and there were always plenty of those in Wierum—he created battles for my sake, though I might not even be a spectator, I might even remain completely ignorant of the fact that I had triumphed by proxy, because he could hardly be expected to recall even one third of his fights. As a result, I had scores of vicarious enemies and victims, none of whom ever bothered to fight with me in person. Because of Rem, they didn't dare.

In spite of that, or because of it, everybody knew and liked him, and only the meanest called him "that little red devil." He was prodigiously freckled, positively crimson-cheeked, red-haired and largely composed of fighting muscles. My mother kept his red hair closely shorn, and submitted him twice daily to close scrutiny, armed with louse comb and carbolic acid, because he persisted in associating with the type of people and animals he'd been forbidden to commune with. Rem associated with everybody, wore anyone's old cap, cavorted about in the filthiest houseboats, wrestled with, pummelled and hugged any creature that would submit to such. All the fisherfolk in town, of course, were his ardent champions, and would frequently lead him home from escapades, refusing to surrender him to my parents until they had promised not to punish him.

Something in the melodramatic line was always happening to him. Five or six times each year he was saved from drowning. Fortunately there was no train to Wierum and little speedy traffic or he would have been run over a hundred times. His accidents were always wonderfully serious, his sparring with death was so frequent that he became contemptuous of it as if it were a mere human being. He survived everything belligerently, to be red-cheeked and clear-blue-eyed again a few moments later.

My mother was resigned to the expectation that he'd never grow up, at least not with all his limbs intact.

"He'll drown, or he'll burn up, or explode, or just disappear," she'd sigh. "Tie him to a post," Great Beppe would advise. "Would you like to try it?" Mother would ask her wearily, at which point they'd become battling mother and mother-in-law again. "Send David after him," would be the inevitable final decision, and off I'd go again, hunting for my brother. On the average I spent four or five hours a day hunting him, finding him, and leading him diplomatically back to school or home, wherever it was he should be. Time meant nothing to him, and the advent of night only heightened his interest in things that could best be perpetrated after dark. He never was vicious; always and purely mischievous.

Once a hefty, six-foot fishwife, who had been peddling fish in the inland towns, delivered Rem home. None of us had been really apprehensive about him because school had been out only a little over an hour, and he'd been staging a ripsnorting fight right after school, on the roof of someone's goat-shed. But here the good woman was, holding an utterly drenched though unbowed Rem by the scruff of the neck. Solemnly she presented him to my mother at the front door. The occasion demanded such formality, she explained, though being a true fishwife she was an ardent believer in the custom of only opening front doors for weddings and funerals.

Her account of what had happened was vociferous and graphic. Addressing herself to my mother, she shouted: "Here, my good woman, my dear woman, and your heart ought to be bleeding if you knew what I saw. Well, there, now you can have him. And it's a wonder he isn't a little spirit singing before God's golden throne this very minute." And after giving my brother a good cuffing she handed him over to Mother, and continued: "Here I was walking back to town, thinking only of pious things and of the weather, and watching the windmills spin out God's name in the white clouds of the sky, and me so thankful for the empty baskets on my yoke, when I look sort of accidentally into the water of the canal beside me, and lo, I see something red in it. Not much red either, because it's a shame how short you clip that poor creature's hair, just because one of God's own little lice might hide away in it. Anyway, I said to myself, that red doesn't belong in that canal. So I kneel down, and I tug at it, and what do I pull up beneath it but this little red devil of a son of yours, though goodness knows there wasn't much to hold on to him by. Yes, but he comes up kicking, though how I can't

figure out, between me and my conscience and God standing on the side trying to give me wisdom. Well, and me all the time imagining I'd have to lay him in one of my baskets like a dead fish and carry him home to his poor hearthbroken mother. But he starts hopping along beside me like nothing had happened, and after ten paces wants to know if I haven't a dried flatfish for him to eat. Well, bless the Lord, I had such a tug-o-war with death over him, that I'd gladly have fed him ten fish, but alas! I had none left. The dirty little stinker, being such a burden to his long-suffering mother."

But something of the sort was always happening. Only a few weeks previously, while a new house was being built along a recently filled-in canal, by that time packed to the brim with blue-black oozing mud, one of the carpenters had suddenly missed the young redhead who had been bouncing up and down on a plank laid on top of the mud. Hurrying to the scene, he pulled at a piece of blue denim just visible above the mud, and extracted Rem. He himself didn't know who or what he was carrying at arm's length to the town pump, but there, after someone had thrown a pail of water over Rem, he was recognized as my mother's own redhead, who that very moment was supposed to be sitting in school.

He was always roaming, preferably outside the town, though he knew every nook and cranny, every goat-shed and fence, every smokehouse and backhouse in town. All the townspeople felt duty bound to bring him back home whenever they found him many miles away with dusk approaching. Usually, no one saw him, as his preferred hunting grounds were on the sea side of the dike, either right in the water or beneath the battered piers, or, when the tide was out, miles away at some cddy trying to snare eels or spear flounders. Fortunately, however, he had a fair respect for the flood tide, which might come in like galloping horses with him just a few paces ahead of it.

One evening all our searching had been in vain. It had been dark for hours, and still there was no trace of him. It was a wild autumn night, and the November winds were howling across the dike from the North Sea. Then when midnight was approaching, the dike warden was aroused by mysterious bursts of flame and dull intonations coming from the reclaimed lands beyond the dike, a mile or so outside of town. He raised an alarm in the town and pronounced that these were perilous days, and who knew but that an unknown enemy might be staging an unexpected raid upon our town. "Oh, but that'll be Rem," my mother announced, when she heard the alarm, and she and Father set out in the

direction of the explosions. It was Rem. Somewhere he'd gotten hold of some gunpowder and some carbide, and figuring that the results would be more spectacular at night than by day, he had gone out to the polder and was having a marvellous time.

I was eighteen months older than Rem. As far as the town's standards went, I was considered a peaceful soul. This characteristic of mine appealed strongly to my brother, who saw danger for me everywhere and anywhere, and accordingly went to battle. In return I wanted to do things for him, but I seldom had the opportunity. His ways weren't mine and he preferred to go his way alone or with a couple of forbidden cronies. The best I could do was to cover up his misdeeds, lead him safely home when the time came, wrestle excitedly with him in our deep wall bed upstairs, and conspire with him not to mention all his sins to God in our prayers. I hoodwinked God but slightly in so doing, because our prayers were often doomed to failure from the start, since we frequently performed them under the covers, instead of on our bare knees beside the bed. Still, when his misdeeds had been very sinful and the consequences loomed darkly, he would frequently plead with me, saying: "You're always so full of words, why don't you say my prayers for me? Just tell everything." Then while I launched gravely into a long enumeration of his evil deeds, he would spoil everything by falling asleep long before I was through.

Where he needed help was at school. But there I simply couldn't help him. His schoolmasters, after trying a week or two, when they were new, always gave up. Fortunately for them, he was either late or inattentive most of the time, so they assumed that they had a perfect right to stand him in a corner, or lock him in the peat bin, where there was no further need of coping with him. Naturally, he despised all teachers, and the mere sight of a school-house would make him burst into tears. He was very copious with his tears anyway, but never a coward.

Neither was he stupid. He was merely incorrigibly independent. Anything he learned at school, he learned obliquely, or as through a glass darkly, because he suspected all direct approaches. One schoolmaster, a man of scientific bent, particularly interested in the flora and fauna round about us, soon learned that only my brother could lead him to the mysteries of nature in our regions. After that they'd go fishing together, root around for slugs, grubs, worms, and bugs, observe birds and flowers and above all study the slithering marine life on the sea bottom. Miraculously, though the man never interfered directly with Rem's impossible reading, writing, and arithmetic, such was the



power of his sympathy that Rem suddenly that term blossomed into something of a scholar. He even memorized his bits of verse and Bible texts, which had hitherto been an impossibility for him.

Unfortunately that teacher was replaced by one considerably less sympathetic. About that time, Father, with a weather eye on the international situation, was once more contemplating migrating to South Africa, or possibly to America. And Rem, imagining the life of a rover and big game hunter to be ahead of him, immediately renounced all further book learning.

Once more he dropped to the foot of the class, and once more we as a family had to go through the Saturday afternoon ordeal of hearing him struggle with the bit of Bible text he had to memorize for school on Monday. None of us, of course, was allowed to do any memorizing on Sunday: that day was devoted exclusively to God. Saturday afternoons, being our only half holidays from school, were usually set aside for two purposes directly concerning Rem. He had to shine the shoes of every member of our family, and simultaneously he had to learn his text. He essayed both with endless tears and boundless grief. And only on those wet winter Sundays when we'd have to wear our black-painted, gold-knobbed, wooden shoes to church did he get any relief at all.

At noon on Saturdays, then, Rem would be sent up to the attic to polish the shoes and memorize his text. It was a fallible plan, but perhaps the only possible one. While he'd rub the shoes, he'd chant the text, frequently interrupting himself, of course, with loud sobs and heart-rending wails. In fact his salty tears stained the shoes so copiously that they became immune to any high polish. As soon as he was silent, Mother would know that he was on the hunt for spiders and centipedes in the rafters, or trying on Father's military uniform, brandishing Father's sword, or trying to make an escape through one of the high dormers.

His texts were usually mercifully short, and should have been fixed in anyone's mind after four or five repetitions. That was reckoning with everybody but Rem, however. I recall one occasion particularly. The text was a shortened version of Jonah i. 2: "Arise, go to Nineveh, and cry against it." Just those words, no more.

Lugubriously Rem climbed the attic stairs with his load of shoes, already chanting: "Arise, go to Nineveh, and cry against it," and being interrupted by the first dry sobs. For an hour after that, we had to listen to that text being chanted and wailed in all manner of intonations and variations, till the inevitable mistake in wording would occur, and Mother would shout her correction up the

stairs. By this time the entire household, including the baby and the scullery girl, and even everybody within hearing distance on Carcass Street would have memorized the text, and from sheer self-protection would have started chanting it, too. But poor Rem's sobs would continue, rise to wails and subside, and be interspersed with heart-rending commands of: "Arise, go to Nineveh, and cry against it."

After another long spell of this, by which time our neighbours had started casting threatening glances at our dormer windows, Mother shouted up the stairs to find out if he'd finished the shoes. Rem wasn't sure, but he hazarded that they might be finished. Would he bring them down for inspection? He certainly would. I don't remember the state of the shoes that particular time, but he was no sooner downstairs and already searching for his old red stocking cap than Mother stopped him and ordered him to recite his text before he could go out. His new-found happiness collapsed on the spot, and try as he might he couldn't get beyond: "Arise, go to Nineveh. . . ." So he had to be sent back to the attic once more. Of course, even when he did memorize his text on Saturday, he usually had forgotten it by Monday, anyway.

But ask him the name of any bird or flower, any type of sail or rigging, and he'd answer you correctly. He was rough and uncontrollable, but like Ferdinand he loved flowers. He knew where they bloomed first and best, and before anyone else had yet seen a spring flower, my mother's vases, pitchers, and old teapots would be filled to overflowing with them. He had the toughest and biggest hands for any hard work or fighting, but somehow they'd turn tender when he handled flowers. "And so, how can you hold anything against him?" Mother used to sigh.

One evening late, in bed, he hinted that for once I could actually be of service to him. I was sworn to secrecy, however, because even his most intimate cronies weren't to know about this new project. So the next day, immediately after school—I'd had a hard time persuading him not to skip classes for this big event—we started out down the sea side of the dike, each provided with two burlap sacks. We marched past the first four old rotten piers, across the lower sheep dike, past the game preserve, and four miles beyond Wierum where we came upon his treasure, the partly decomposed carcass of a cow.

It was a lonely and forsaken spot, and the smell of the carcass was terrific, but a promise was a promise, and I stuck to Rem's side. Among a multitude of other things, Rem was a collector of old bones and scrap iron, a pursuit which sometimes netted him as much as ten Dutch cents a week. This enterprise was forbidden

by our parents, as not being worthy of our station, but Rem could never resist the prizes that he came across. And here was a veritable treasure trove. Rem started to work at once tearing the carcass limb from limb and filling our sacks with the dismembered parts.

On my part the odoriferous job soon became no longer a labour of love, and Rem, taking my increasingly more delicate constitution into consideration, told me I could turn my back while he performed the more unpleasant tasks. Then we trudged home again, each dragging two burlap sacks filled with heavy, moist bones, timing ourselves so that we arrived in town after dark, and secreting our hoard in a seaman's shanty to which Rem had access somehow. "Now just tell Father that we're late because you had to search for me," Rem advised me. "It's my fault, anyway, and perhaps you'd be searching for me right now, who knows? You usually are."

For three consecutive days we took trips to the dead beast and returned heavily laden. Then our enterprise ended abruptly. On the fourth day we came across a washed-up shark, rather decomposed but sufficiently whole so that we could drag it all the way up the steep dike slope, over it, and down the land side again. For no discernible good reason, we then deposited it in the freshwater canal on which the sun beat unmercifully, increasing the odours tenfold. Then we continued on our way to the dead cow. On the way back, however, we were intercepted by the dike warden. It seemed that the dead shark had assailed the olfactory nerves of the townfolk so much that he had been sent to investigate. Finding the shark in the canal, and seeing us with our sacks, he put two and two together, and made us fish the malodorous shark out of the canal again, pull it across the dike, and dump it back into the sea once more. In the meanwhile he'd inspected our sacks of bones, and declared them to be sea booty, which hence belonged to him and the Royal Dutch Government, and not to us at all. Even so he made us drag the burden into town for him.

A few days later, however, we sold our own hoard for the enormous sum of one gulden, two kwartjes and one dubbeltje. Conscience-stricken at so much ill-gotten affluence, we decided to buy Mother a new teapot with part of the proceeds. That proved to be a mistake, however, since it wasn't Mother's birthday, nor anywhere near Sint Nikolaas Day, the customary day for giving gifts. On top of that, the new teapot didn't pour well, and Mother, on returning it, learned how we'd been able to purchase it in the first place. At the same time, she also heard all

about the episode of the dead shark. "David," she said to me severely, "that you with all your intelligence should abet Rem in such things, that grieves me most." Of course, she would never understand how much I owed to Rem.

After that, matters went *their more usual way again*, with Rem fighting my battles, and me shining in reflected glory. Sometimes I was humiliated, however. Once, when a farmer caught me raiding his turnip patch, he simply held on to me and asked gruffly: "Well, where's that red-devil brother of yours?" He wouldn't be convinced that, as far as I knew, Rem was miles away hunting for snipe eggs. He was certain that I'd never have perpetrated the misdeed all by myself, and when I'd at last convinced him, he only gave me one mediocre kick in my pants and vowed: "If I ever get my hands on that redhead brother of yours, I'll crush every bone in his body." But I, I wasn't worthy of anything like that.

It seemed a pity to me even then that some day Rem would have to grow up and become civilized, civilization being what it is. "David," Rem said to me one night in bed, "do you suppose I'd better pray because I didn't go to school this afternoon? Because even you didn't know that I hadn't, did you?"

"I suppose in that case," I counselled him, "it might be best to tell God all about it."

"Yes, I suppose I'd better," he said earnestly, at once launching into his memorized prayer and repeating it several times for good measure, realizing then that he hadn't yet put the afternoon's sin into specific words.

"Will you say it, in really fancy words?" he asked me.

## CHAPTER X

### WHEN THE FLESH IS WEAK

IN THE MEANWHILE something had gone wrong with me; physically I'd become quite a problem. No one knew the cause of my illness nor the remedy for it. When I'd come to Wierum I'd been a robust lad with rosy cheeks, and the old fishwives had described me as a "healthy jewel." During my seventh and eighth years, however, I grew thin and pale, and so became the special concern of the same old fishwives, who now prognosticated little short of an early death for me, certainly a most pronounced decline.

It came about gradually. At first I was unable to eat any fruit, then any vegetables, cooked or uncooked, without getting pains which would leave me exhausted for hours. In the end I was eating only soggy rice and starch puddings, and even those precariously. A whole procession of changing doctors duly submitted me to worm-cookies, cod liver oils, laxatives, herbs, alternate periods of rest and violent exercise, but they couldn't stop my steady decline.

My parents would have worried about me a great deal more, but for the fact that for a two-year period every member in our family ran through a whole series of violent diseases, and complicated accidents. My brother Meindert was at death's door with pneumonia three times within two years, another brother had it twice, and my mother simply went from one siege of pneumonia into even more virulent maladies, and then back to an even worse case of pneumonia. The others fared almost as badly. During at least two periods of several weeks, I was the only member of the entire family who went his pallid way outdoors, while Carcass Street in front of our house was strewn with sand to deaden all noise and the town crier at a discreet distance warned folk to walk on tiptoe past our house and keep their voices low. The fishwives were convinced that we had been bewitched in an unnecessarily violent fashion. But the miracle was that I, the weakest of the family, escaped all the spectacular maladies. It is remotely possible that I was so allergic to all edible foods that the germs considered me not worth attacking. In those days no one had yet heard (at least popularly) about allergies, however, so there seemed to be no way of getting me into good shape.

At the time we had an enormously robust doctor, who habitually wore an ensign's cap, and who rode to town on a motor-cycle which backfired so much that we could hear him coming two miles away. He was in attendance on the entire sick family, but he'd already practically washed his hands of me. After all, he couldn't drag me spectacularly from death's maw as he had done the others. My brother Rem struck his particular fancy by recovering with such rapidity that the man couldn't believe his own eyes. However, Rem immediately proved his complete recovery by assuming the role of a ram and butting the doctor so hard in the stomach that he tumbled over backward. The doctor exclaimed: "Now that one is a miracle of a fellow, a real stout fellow!" and then he'd look wearily and suspiciously at me and say *sotto voce*: "But I guess it isn't your fault it is, that we can't get you full of life again?"

At the time my mother was seeing flayed horses galloping

insanely around the chandelier. It was delirium, the doctor told us, and Mother was passing through her second siege of pneumonia. Poor Meindert was lying heavy-headed and lonely in his bed, just emerging from his third pneumonia attack. He'd been so close to death that the whole town, including the doctor, had prayed for him. Of course, he'd been born with a caul over his head, and so according to the fishwives he was doomed to perish; still, if through intercession and prayer God could be moved to perform one of his miracles, so much the better. And after three years, he did survive.

At that time the doctor decided it would be better to remove me from the house and from the presence of all the more violently sick members of the family. Someone had to pay some special attention to me and at least get me to eat an occasional dry rusk, or a bit of mashed potatoes. At the same time he made a weighty pronouncement, however: "Yes, that one, if he survives his twelfth year, and keeps going till he's eighteen, after that he'll have a stronger digestive system than any of the others." How he knew, or where he'd got the gift of prophecy, I don't know, but the fact is that now I can eat anything under the sun.

And so I kept languishing along, while the others put up miraculous fights against death. But my paleness and lack of energy convinced the fisherfolk that they personally must do something about me. Whenever I appeared on the streets I was pulled into this one's house or that one's, and fortified with strong tea, morsels of smoked fish, and cooked concoctions, all of which I loved the taste of, but which would prostrate me with cramps half an hour later. Of course, my mother wasn't in any condition to stop them from administering to me.

My trouble was that I liked the taste of all foods, but my stomach would have none of them. At school and after it, it had long since become impossible for me to take part in any of the games. Every ten minutes or so I would have to sit down, doubled up with pain, so that it was silly even to start playing running, jumping, or hiding games. For a while I still was a member of the gangs which made forays into neighbouring carrot and turnip patches. I would merely chew the stolen vegetables and spit them out, but a few minutes later the pains would come just the same. Fortunately for me, perhaps, the climate in our northern regions was so unfavourable to fruit growing that there wasn't an apple or cherry tree within miles, and the three pear trees in town would bring forth only about fifty pears the size of peanuts, and then give up. One plum tree was reputed to have borne three plums one year, but never again.

Naturally, I soon lost all interest in the vegetable-patch forays, since I couldn't share in the booty. I'd go to the high dike and sit and play there alone, but there the sea winds would make me chilly. Or I would descend the dike to play with the large orange and green crabs, but naturally there my feet would get wet. I couldn't go wading without having to spend a couple of days in bed as a result. I'd have to walk to school slowly, with deliberately few motions. It was no wonder that I soon took to reading everything in sight. At least I could do that. School was so simple that in spite of being absent a great deal, I regularly won all the prizes offered, especially if they were for arithmetic or geography. In the latter I was a prodigy. When my health allowed it, Father would take me on business trips with him, and I became popular in the offices of wholesale dealers and manufacturers, where men would plant me far enough away from a map of Holland or all of Europe so that I couldn't read the names, and ask me to identify any place to which they pointed. I never made any errors, but I'd much rather have been able to eat an apple healthily.

Whenever my birthday or the Feast of Sint Nikolaas came along, I would simply put in another request for a better and larger atlas, if possible with as many population statistics as were available. During my eighth year, I read a Dutch translation of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. I loved that book more than any adventure story I'd ever read. I read it again and again, and in the end nothing would do but that I draw an intricate map of the entire pilgrimage, assigning population figures to all the stopping-off places. About that same time I took all the names of tribes and towns from the five books of Moses, and the figures mentioned in connection with them, and played with these statistics much more happily than I would with toys.

Naturally, the Turkish-Italian war, and the Balkan upheavals were the best possible grist for my mill. I knew every mountain pass and village where a battle was fought. With tense anticipation I awaited the new boundary changes, and any new statistics that might be released from those regions. The sinking of the *Titanic* simply annoyed me. It happened on the ocean, and it took the general interest off the war. Of course, I also read any book I could get hold of. Since I'd read at least twenty books in succession about the Boer War, all exceedingly biased, I imposed upon England a peculiar punishment: I refused to learn anything about the geography of Great Britain. Somehow, obliquely, and for reasons which I can't remember now, the United States shared in my condemnation, perhaps largely because my European atlases were so much more vague about the shapes and statistics

of the Western Hemisphere than of the Eastern. I wanted facts and not mere hints and generalities; at least that's what I wanted geographically.

I started reading Dickens, in translation, of course. It was *Oliver Twist*, but my mother, finding me engrossed in it, declared the book to be "un-Christian reading matter," I suppose largely because of the grotesque illustrations which embellished that particular edition. Next I toted *Tom Sawyer* home from somewhere, and that, too, was banned, since it couldn't possibly be constructive or "moral." Either of those books could have converted me easily to England and the United States; and no doubt, at that early age, I would hardly have been affected by the non-Christianity and anti-morality of Twain and Dickens. Instead, I secretly started to read anything I could get by Jules Verne, so that the Dark Continent was a region of light to me compared with America and England. At home and openly, I kept reading about the Boer War and the persecution of Protestant believers by the Catholic Church. I knew every *kopje* in South Africa where any pint-sized skirmish had occurred better than any local region, and had all the facts about Boer War leaders right at my fingertips.

Then even this pastime was taken away from me. I had started to walk in my sleep and the doctor decided I read too much, and that instead of reading I should sit in the sun with the birds and the bees. I did sit in the sun with the birds and bees, but also with tables of population statistics which I manipulated myself, increasing or decreasing populations by preordained percentages, from imagined fiscal year to fiscal year, and through all manner of fictitious catastrophes. Privately I had decided that no population scales of, say, Bojabad, Erzurum, Devrek or Kaisarie in Asia Minor, from the year 1880 to the possible year 2380, were capable of making me walk in my sleep. Perhaps I was wrong in this, however.

Also I was growing tired of capturing all the school prizes, and accumulating as a result stacks of paper-bound, faultily illustrated volumes about little girls raising peas in cracks of window sills. Somehow these Christian heroines always gained health, wealth and faith in God's mercy from watching the peas shoot up, whereupon they'd invariably dedicate their lives to converting heathens in Paris, France, or Kenya or Gabon.

Then something happened which became a turning point in my life. It happened on a Monday when I was staying at my Great Beppe's because every member of our family was seriously sick again. From Great Beppe's I watched our house of illness, and the sand-strewn pavement in front, over which people walked



with solicitous mien, studying our windows. I think I must have felt rather important belonging to a family which had such grave maladies. All that morning, however, I'd been busy memorizing the 51st Psalm, which, by the time my deaf and dumb uncle came dashing into the room, was safely fixed in my mind, with another book prize as a sure result. My uncle burst in upon me with violent gestures, and awful noises coming from his locked throat. But I couldn't understand him. He was followed then by all my aunts and Great Beppe, and they told me that during the night my youngest brother, the only well one in our house, had been taken seriously ill.

Suddenly I burst out into uncontrollable laughter, while the tears streamed down my cheeks. My aunts were horrified, but Grandmother was wise to the fact that I was having an old-fashioned attack of hysterics. She calmed me down and bundled me off to school. But when it was my turn to recite the 51st Psalm from memory, I suddenly realized that not one line of it remained in my mind. The master was astonished, but no amount of coaxing helped. Knowing about all the illness at our house, he gave me a pencil as a special consolation prize.

In the meanwhile, however, a strange sense of elation had come over me. I felt as if I'd perpetrated an actual feat of deviltry in having failed to recite the Psalm. I decided I was going to do it again, not regularly, but when my teachers least expected it of me. Robbing the poor box couldn't have made me feel more wicked or foolhardy. I had failed, and that feeling of failure seemed too wonderful for words. Gradually I started refusing to memorize anything at all in the way of verses, poetry or little pieces for the edification of the soul. By the time I was sixteen I was confirmed in my belief that no good could come from cramming my head full of rhymes, saws, texts and sayings which some so-called superiors thought were good for me.

Still later, in America, a particularly fluffy and lush teacher tried to make me memorize reams of the more drippy and lachrymose effusions of Longfellow and Tennyson, in order to make me a more complete and civilized American. When I refused steadfastly, he tried to flunk me in his course, and in front of the entire class called me "lily-livered, unsavoury, uncouth and perverse." But, since he is a man who still teaches that nothing really great and moral has been produced in American fiction since Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona*, and actually holds a chair in English at an accredited American college, perhaps my obnoxious determination to keep my mind clear of such rubbish was the best possible thing for me.

My vows against memorizing notwithstanding, even going to school became a physical impossibility for me during my ninth year. I stayed at home nearly a whole year, and filled my mind with other kinds of encumbrances than those meted out at school.

## CHAPTER XI

### TERRESTRIAL PEOPLE AND A FRIEND

IT IS BETTER NOT to dwell too much upon those months of illness. Most of the time I was considerably in my own way, tired of resting, fed up with reading, avoiding the dike, where the seamen's widows were liable to wax too sympathetic. The seafolk were off to Germany and on German luggers; most of the land-workers were in the fields from dawn till dusk. I was nearly always alone or among old and listless people.

The landlubbers were considerably less exciting than the fisherfolk. They lived humbly and unspectacularly, and though their conduct in Wierum was influenced by that of the dominant fisherfolk, they on their part exerted a steadying influence. Less numerous than the fisherfolk, and much harder workers, living considerably closer to starvation's edge, they weren't nearly as much in evidence in the town. Naturally the fisherfolk segregated themselves from the mere workers of the soil, but their own gregariousness made them suspect any land-worker who wanted to keep to himself. During the summer, when I was ill and was almost forced to observe them, the land-workers formed the more numerous group. Work in the fields, however, kept their activities largely outside of town, until the bells summoned them homeward again.

Most of them were poor, just poor enough not to be ambitious, but merely resigned. They knew they were better off in Holland than in most countries. They didn't migrate to America because they lacked the means; furthermore, they had a pet idea that one moved to America only for "reasons": debts, scandals, quarrels, or to avoid military training. Hence they preferred to remain what they were and where they were, in respectable poverty.

Most of them rented a few acres of ground outside the town, and lived simply in small, meanly furnished thirds or halves of houses. A few hired themselves out to the half-dozen big land-owners in the vicinity. Their station was accordingly a bit better

and somewhat more secure. They called themselves the "bound" workers, in contrast to the "loose" workers, and conducted themselves with a little more show of respectability. The children nearly always followed the example of the parents and married their own kind, unspectacularly.

The young women might imitate the fishermen's daughters in their somewhat bizarre dress, at least as far as hats went: these were wide-brimmed and swathed in two yards of pale silk, preferably white, with two red roses planted upon them. They'd all have exactly the same amount of material in their ample green and blue skirts, their decorous blouses. Naturally, they were horrified by the fisherwomen's too-short skirts, which displayed a tempting stretch of ankle and calf. Also they believed that they looked humbler and prettier and more in keeping with their low station by not copying the shining faces of the seamen's girls. Those girls, especially on Sundays, would often wash themselves with green soap, allowing the suds to dry on their faces, so that they looked like lacquered dolls. The land girls preferred to attract their mates less shinily. They also did so more soberly, as land-workers seldom could afford to buy the "courting anisette."

Quite apart from the regular land-workers, and lowest in our social scale—so low that they didn't have any rights as citizens—were the few houseboat dwellers, living in their unnavigable square houseboats, propped up or anchored just beyond the vermillion fence which marked the town's limits. They were the wards of the town, usually strangers, frequently of German origin. Wierum had only six or seven of these houseboats, and each of these housed a weird and unsavoury ménage: ex-convicts, imbeciles, vagabonds, alcoholics, who lived on whatever was meted out to them as an inducement for them to hold their peace.

The town's policeman wasn't in the least respected; he was just barely tolerated if he remained on his own side of the outer canal. Wierum itself took care of its own rather negligible crime problems. The town policeman was usually a veteran soldier who'd served in the East Indies and might be suffering from some tropical malady, too much drinking, or some debilitating social disease. Hence he needed his rest. If he kept his sword polished, trained an occasional police dog, and kept out of decent folk's way, he was allowed to lead a peaceful life at the expense of the Government.

Somewhat above the land-workers were the more privileged tradesmen, craftsmen, the very few professionals and the retired gentry. Those, if they believed in tradition at all, were the ones who made their women wear golden helmets, who rented the

good pews in church, who wore leather shoes, the weather permitting. Only in winter did they parade to church with black-painted wooden shoes adorned with gilded rosettes. Among them, because they were rather more articulate and better situated economically, could be found the town's few socialists.

We children were never allowed to forget that we came from one of the privileged families as far as Wierum's own social set-up was concerned. On the other hand, Father's business had its clients among all the classes of town, and because the fisher-folk refused to be beholden to anyone for anything, we were supposed to belong to them also. This in spite of the fact that we might be the only really native children of the town who attended school wearing wide Eton collars, bright ties and leather shoes. Of course we all changed these school clothes for more ordinary ones as soon as we got home; all of us, that is, except my brother Rem, who hadn't had them on to begin with. Since he spent more of his time in mud and water than out of them, Mother, to the consternation of our fashionable aunts across the street, allowed him to go to school in his play clothes. We also were the only boys who wore overcoats, of which the fisherfolk were both scornful and respectful. They themselves wouldn't be caught dead or alive in "such a long garment"; nevertheless there was something spectacular about overcoats which pleased them.

Whenever strange children visited town and playmates who conducted themselves properly had to be found for them, we were sent for, and, dressed in our best clothes, became the mentors of the visitors. Unwittingly we thus learned strange ways and customs for which Wierum had no inclination. And so it came to pass that we were also deemed sufficiently cultivated to associate with the minister's children. I became the special playmate of his oldest son. Our minister had come from the south of Holland, spoke no Frisian, and dressed on all public occasions in tails, top hat and cane. From the beginning to the end of his days among us, he remained utterly bewildered by the fisherfolk. Pathetically he would try on occasions to come down to their level, but somehow he always managed to fail ignominiously. The fisherfolk had a particular hatred for their own last names: they smacked of the Napoleonic era when they had been forced upon them. Consequently they preferred their own secular nicknames. But our dominie, trying to be democratic, managed to confuse matters even in this small thing. In fancy ecclesiastically enunciated "Hollandsch," he would greet Old Beetle, Old Crab, Old Pot-house, Locust, or Fishbasket by those nicknames prefixed by the formal *Mijnheer* which made the whole thing specially ludicrous.

The fisherfolk decided it was scandalous that a man of God should address them in that fashion. They started avoiding him on the street and stayed away from his politely enunciated sermons, and only reluctantly conceded that he was a holy man at all when they needed him at their deathbeds.

So our austere and impractical minister stayed behind his tall hedges of yew and boxwood, personally tending his formal garden; when he crossed the little parsonage bridge at all during the week, it was because of a matter of life and death. His son Leendert became my best friend, and the rectory garden, which had twenty times more trees and a hundred times more flowers and shrubbery in it than all the rest of the town of Wierum, became our playground. It was a mysterious and romantic spot, equally suited to be the garden of Eden in our games or the jungles of Africa, or the bloody battlefields of Palestine. It lacked mountains, of course, but I soon declared that an old straw-thatched supply house in a corner of the back garden might be fire-spouting Vesuvius, or the Matterhorn, or Mount Sinai of the Ten Commandments, or Mount Carmel on which Elijah slaughtered the pagan priests. Even in my games, which I usually invented myself, my interest in geography and the Bible was always evident. Usually I managed to be Moses, Elijah or even God Himself. But one summer day, after the minister had secretly observed me, he put a crimp in my ambitions. The cramps that I went to bed with that particular evening could therefore be traced to three sources. One, I had mocked God by imitating Him, and was being chastised by Him. Two, I had tried to eat, but actually had spat out a thimble-sized green pear growing in the rectory garden. Three, I had also lain exposed to the elements atop a snow clad mountain (the thatched roof of the supply house) and had realistically caught cold.

Twice the good minister had to give me a whacking with his famous cane. Once when, as a holy missionary, I forced a heathen chieftain (Leendert) to undress and submerge himself for baptism in the waters of the rectory moat. It was November, and it was no wonder that the chieftain's father used his cane on me. The second time I had set fire to the cone-shaped pinnacle of the straw roof of the supply house to make a more realistic Stromboli volcano out of it. Leendert, however, had had his misgivings about me as a creator of volcanoes, and had run to get his father while I was still trying to ignite the damp straw. His father subdued my creative impulses neatly with his cane.

The land-workers and the fisher-folk, seeing me consorting with the minister's son, allowed among themselves that my mother was

pegging me pretty high. Of course, during skating holidays I was on the ice with the regular town children. Our minister, being a South Hollander, considered skating to be of the devil, and wouldn't allow any of his children to go near the ice. Evidently my skating sins clung to me for some weeks after the ice holidays were over, because I was barred from the rectory till the sheep on the dike were with lamb again, and other early harbingers of spring were evident.

My friend Leendert languished through those skating holidays. He would beg me to teach him skating secretly, but someone always found us out. Soon I convinced him that he was afflicted with weak angles, anyway, simply to avoid further trouble. Already my friends and relations had announced to me that Leendert was unworthy of skates. "Just look at the way he wears his wooden shoes. He stands in them like a rooster in a pair of mittens." He was a good and pliable lad, and didn't need much convincing.

I made up for that bit of diplomatic treachery by teaching him other sorts of evil, and by using him as a stooge in my minor misdeeds. In the end I even converted him to drawing with coloured crayons on Sunday, although the dominie tolerated only black pencils on that day. There were certain people I disliked, and as an act of fealty I insisted he should consider them his enemies, too, presumably because the combined hatred of two people was more efficacious than of one, and sins committed in consequence tended to become somewhat more diffused. I told him it wasn't necessary to tell his father that he had enemies whom he hated—against all the precepts of the New Testament—because they weren't really his enemies, and he was simply being loyal to a friend. So we stole a bit, joined in occasional street fights, intentionally provoked our teachers, stoned cats and dogs and upset vegetable carts sometimes, but always tried to keep within the letter of God's or the minister's complicated laws. Quite often I could think up more complicated laws which made our actions right.

We had a headmaster at the time whom I didn't like. Once he punished me for correcting some erroneous statement he had made in regard to the Pyramids, a second time when he made a mistake in identifying one of our more common sea birds, and a third time when he placed an eastern German port at the mouth of a river which was one hundred per cent Russian and always had been. After that I was critical of all his teachings, and soon learned to know exactly where his weaknesses lay. Soon I realized that he considered Leendert, as a minister's son, to be

untouchable and almost holy. No matter what Leendert did wrong, or failed to do right, he wasn't punished, but some humbler member of the class usually would be made the sacrificial lamb. I decided to press Leendert into my service.

First I persuaded him to come to classes just a few minutes late. I would manage to precede him by a few seconds, and just when punishment was about to be meted out to me Leendert would make his appearance. The master wouldn't dare to punish me and not Leendert. Leendert was quick to catch on to the spirit of the thing, especially since we could detect no specific sin in it. He even contributed a few ideas of his own. During singing lessons, I would manage to sing three notes behind, and Leendert five. We sounded like idiots, but our master didn't dare punish us. After this when the master made one of his frequent errors—the man was unbelievably lazy and inept—I'd see to it that Leendert, either at once or preferably after he'd consulted his father, made an issue of it. Also I insisted that Leendert in all cases mention to our master that he had consulted his father personally about the problem under debate.

Matters came to a head when the master caught me meting out justice where he himself should have done it long ago. For some time I had been finding my new fur-lined cap stuffed into one of the school toilets every afternoon. I complained about this to the master, asked for permission to keep the cap with me and put it in my desk, even reported to him that I had absolute proof who the guilty person was—a particularly offensive school sneak. All to no avail, our headmaster wasn't interested and couldn't bestir himself; in fact, he showed definite signs of pleasure at my plight.

So it happened one day that as soon as the suspected sneak had raised his finger, asking to be excused, and had been given permission, I raised two fingers (two pupils afflicted by the same needs were not allowed to leave the room simultaneously) to indicate that I was motivated by a graver necessity. I marched out of the room, sufficiently far behind the culprit to catch him in the very act of stuffing my cap into the toilet. I was busy dunking his whole head into it, when the headmaster caught me and gave me an unmerciful paddling, even though my cap was still there as evidence. As a result of this, my father decided it was time to get together with the school council, and there he found further proof that the headmaster was generally considered to be an uncivilized bonehead who would be much happier in another school.

Everything had to be done in slow, unspectacular adult fashion,

however, so as not to give a bad reputation to our Christian school. And so it happened that our moustache-twirling headmaster was still with us when the aeroplane fell into the sea, just beyond our dike.

## CHAPTER XII

### AEROPLANE IN THE SEA

IT WAS MID-MAY and new blood, new courage and new energy seemed to be surging through everything, including myself. It was one of those days when you were bound to feel belligerent, even with no combat in sight. After lunch I was on my way to school and Rem was somewhere, sprinting and steeple-chasing over goat-sheds, hedges and through back alleys. Hence I was alone when two boys approximately my own height and weight stopped me and challenged me to fight. On a milder or muggier or greyer day, I think I would have preferred flight, or I would have stalled them off till Rem appeared to champion my cause. But I felt in such fine shape that day that I stood my ground. We were still sparring for an opening when one of them compared me—favourably or unfavourably, it doesn't matter which—with my Pake David, with special emphasis on my undesirable Old Testament name. I jumped into action.

Naturally, I knew at once that I was at a disadvantage. In the first place, I was outnumbered, but what was worse, I was unarmed. I wasn't wearing the wooden shoes we boys did all our fighting with. My leather ones might be superb for flight, but I couldn't very easily wrench them off my feet. Moreover, they weren't heavy enough to serve as bludgeons. While one of my opponents stooped over to take the wooden shoe off one of his feet, the other tried to hold me at bay by flaying at me with his arms. Naturally, they had planned their method of assault according to their weapons, so before they were quite organized, I rammed my head into the stomach of the one, and gave the other one a swift kick in the shins. By this time the fishwives along the street were screaming and taking sides, while we started rolling in wild confusion over the cobbles. After this first sally, I realized I had no chance whatsoever, even though a whole bevy of short-skirted females were rooting piercingly for me. I took quick flight on my leather shoes, while my opponents came clattering clumsily behind.



I was excellent in my flight and sprinted much more agilely around corners than they did; then kept them at bay in my grandfather's yard with a clothes pole, until I could open the barn door, dash past the yammering goats and slide behind the ratty partitions into the midnight-dark interior of the old school. My enemies shouted that they'd lie in wait for me outside till doomsday. But what I dreaded most was that my grandfather would find me there and turn me over summarily to them. For a long time I lay behind bunches of old flax in which rats and mice rustled, till at last I dared to emerge, and, seeing my way clear between two marvellously high manure piles, ran to school.

But school had already started. Then I saw that my faithful friend Leendert was waiting for me beneath the little parsonage bridge. Of course, he had his instructions never to enter school before I did, but I was genuinely touched by his loyalty. After all, he'd had no specific instructions for this occasion. I marched into our schoolroom only three minutes late, and Leendert followed twenty seconds later, so that our headmaster could only chew his reddish-yellow moustache and restrain his wrath. From their seats, however, my two enemies made threatening gestures signifying that they'd get me after school. I also noticed, on looking through the glass partition that separated our form from the lower ones, that Rem hadn't yet arrived in school. He must have been delayed beneath a rack of drying fish, in someone's garden patch or chicken roost, or perhaps half-submerged in a canal. After school I would have to face my enemies alone. Leendert as a fighting ally couldn't be relied upon; we were too close to the parsonage, which was right next the school. Any bellicose action on the part of the minister's son was sure to be reported.

Then the miracle happened. Our master, in the midst of a declension lesson, was summoned to the door and came marching back in a fine fettle, with military step and an especially kaiser-like twist to his moustachois. We were all ordered to rise at once, stand at attention in the aisles, and start singing the Dutch national anthem. Through the glass partition we could see that all the lower forms had received the same instructions. Something stupendous was afoot. Perhaps a new heir to the House of Orange had been born, perhaps we were at war with some dastardly enemy, perhaps the burgomaster had had a stroke.

We finished our singing at a mighty tempo, and immediately our master started to lecture us sternly on how to behave in public, how to march two abreast, how to raise our voices more strongly in song than any rival could, how to prove to all the town

that we were products of a Christian upbringing, how, above all, to show the pupils of the public school that we were superior to them. "Because," he concluded, clearing his throat stertorously, "a German aeroplane has fallen into the sea just beyond the dike. And none of you has ever seen an aeroplane, I dare say. But we'll show the Germans that we're unafraid. And now, for the sake of your education, of the Queen and our great country, we'll first say a word of prayer, and then we'll march to the dike."

March out of the school we did, brothers and sisters in a common cause, all personal enmities forgotten. We had to march at the headmaster's pace, so that the plumper-legged had to fall into a trot. The two rickety imbeciles—who, by the way, were still in the first grade—were left behind entirely, hobbling along on their old shoes, and sniffing snottily. This naturally brought their slatternly mother on the scene, who evidently had been on the way to school personally to lead her precious jewels to the fallen plane. She shook her fists at the headmaster and declared resoundingly that the national authorities would hear about this outrage, because her children were as good in the sight of the Lord as the others. A hefty fishwife silenced her, thus relieving us from our embarrassing situation, and on we marched again.

Still, the woman had delayed us sufficiently to cause a new dilemma. There, just ahead of us, turning into the main street of the town, came the double columns of the public schoolchildren, actually carrying a large flag, and singing another patriotic anthem which had less Christianity in it, but was just as martial as ours. We had been outpaced, and could do nothing but wait while these worldly columns swept on ahead of us. Neither was there a flag among us: our humiliation was great.

Our headmaster quickly consulted the masters of the lower forms. Strategy took shape upon their faces as we watched. True, our honour was at stake, for now that we were being put to a crucial test, the eyes of all the town were fixed upon us more critically than ever. And already our behaviour was at all times weighed extra-judicially. So we were ordered to uncover our heads, to sing an especially religious hymn, and then to shout three times in unison: "Long live the House of Orange."

It was easy to see that whatever townspeople were left on the streets approved of our actions. Unfortunately, at least ninety per cent of the total population was already on top of the dike, with their eyes turned to sea and their backs to us. Then we marched on again, and clattered with a marvellous staccato sound over the pavements of our main street—alternately cobbles and red bricks—right to the foot of the dike. There we stopped again.

On top of the dike the minions of the public school had already broken ranks and were scattering everywhere. Our headmaster made a derisive gesture toward them, and then admonished us: "Now, always remember your station, your upbringing and your school. And now let us all sing, calmly and solemnly: 'Wilhelmus Van Nassouwe.'" We sang, but our voices were practically soprano with impatience. And then we were allowed to file solemnly up the dike steps and line up on top of the dike. And, yes, there, partly submerged in the outgoing tide, lay the grey aeroplane, many yards from shore. I think we were all considerably disappointed after all the build-up and the dramatic march to the scene. What lay there seemed a rickety and ungraceful thing; besides, we soon learned that the pilots had been rowed ashore, and that they were already sitting at the inn with steins of beer and a German interpreter before them. All our efforts to show them that we were unafraid had been wasted.

After we'd stood there gazing mutely out at the sea and the wrecked thing in it, it became much more interesting to turn and look landward. There, converging upon Wierum from all the villages around us, literally filling the roads, came cyclists and people afoot to look at the miracle which had befallen us. On the whole, however, people weren't nearly as excited as they had been some years before when the first automobile had come to town. Suddenly there it had been in front of the inn, glossy with paint and shining with brass. Its arrival hadn't been announced by any clop-clopping of hoofs over the cobbles, nor by any great whirring of wheels, sizzling of stream, or clouds of smoke and fumes, as the fishwives had expected. However, they had decided as they stood examining it on the square, that the steam which gave the monster motion must be locked up in the brass headlights, and that no one had better generate any sort of heat near it or the whole town might be blown to perdition. And now, this absurd and obviously fallible grey machine simply lay in their sea, at the mercy of its everyday waves. No, the aeroplane wasn't really so much after all.

In the meanwhile our headmaster was diligently trying to explain to us all the mysteries of flying, about which undoubtedly he knew even less than he did of history and geography. Gradually we children sidled away from him, and had a great time all by ourselves, until I spotted my enemies, already in the act of moving against me. But there, too, was Rem, at the water's edge, no doubt eagerly measuring the space between him and the fallen plane, though he couldn't swim a stroke. And there too were all my aunts, and my mother with my brother Meindert, once more

just recuperating from some grave illness. I decided to edge close enough to Rem to show my enemies what they really had to face, should they even so much as lift a hand against me.

Gradually the dike was getting more and more crowded, and at last the pilots emerged from the inn, looking very German and authoritative. Help in the person of some mechanic from our provincial capital was due to arrive, and besides, in another two hours the tide would be out sufficiently for us to walk right out to the plane. The two pilots were rowed out again, and just before they set out Rem suddenly appeared in the row-boat, but was ejected promptly. Our master was frantically trying to assemble us so that we could sing the national anthem to edify the Germans, or to put fear in their hearts. Alas! he never got a quorum.

The great moment was now at hand. The thing was going to rise and fly, but not on wings of song, as our master had intended. The moment, however, stretched into two more hours, when at last a dust-covered automobile arrived from Leeuwarden with the mechanic. He, in turn, was partly rowed, partly carried to the plane. We held our breaths, but that proved impossible to keep up for half an hour. Nothing happened all that time. Then at last the propeller started whirring, and people shouted the encouraging sort of remarks one is apt to shout at a horse that has fallen on the icy pavement. An hour or so later the mechanic waded to shore again, and this time the contraption did some fancy sputtering and wheezing, which sent the more cautious bystanders scrambling off the dike to seek cover on the land side. And then, as if all the time it had been simply tantalizing us, the contraption bobbed a bit, then lurched and lifted, and seemed to be in the air, though the colour of the sea and sky were so similar that we couldn't really tell. But it rose unmistakably higher, and roared louder, and though all of us waved frantically, the two men in it, being German and therefore superior to us mortals, never deigned to look back at us. Then it simply became less noisy, smaller and more difficult to see and headed for the gap between the islands of Ameland and Schiermonnikoog, still flying low, in the direction of England. Why England, we started wondering aloud? And why had the pilots refused to tell what their mission was?

Now at last, people started descending the dike to return to their homes in all the villages. We all supposed that this had been a very important occasion, though Great Beppe asked sardonically: "Now actually, what did we see? Can you tell me? Perhaps we'd better go home and play the accordion."

Which was a wise thing for me to do, as my enemies were edging closer, and Rem was down below the pier trying to catch eels or crabs. Leendert had long since returned to the parsonage to report to his studious father what was happening outside the dike. His father had already seen over a hundred planes in his life, he explained. Personally I boasted of having seen three or four, though I conceded that before none had been in the water.

The times were certainly significant, we were told from pulpit and rostrum and at school. Grave events were in the making. Meanwhile Wierum made the front pages of the newspapers once more, and though the excitement had given me some unexpected internal cramps again, I was edified to read about the fame of my native town, while lying propped up in bed with hot flannels upon my stomach.

### CHAPTER XIII

## KERMIS IN WIERUM

IN THE MEANWHILE kermis had come and gone. For weeks before its coming we had been prepared in school, in church and at home against its temptations. Usually kermis was timed for just before the fisherfolk started out on their luggers for the year's fishing. Without the fisherfolk there was little use having any kermis at all. Wierum's kermis with them, however, was one of the gaudiest and most famous, often rivalling those of the province's eleven cities. The kermis was of the devil, however, and when it was in town we were told to avert our eyes, and to keep away from the main streets and square where the various concessions, the merry-go-rounds and booths and all the other pavilions of the wicked had been erected.

Kermis previously had been so important that the townfolk frequently reckoned their births, marriages and deaths by it. Now, because of the combined efforts of Church and moral-uplift societies, it was on the decline. It was a heathen spectacle, a remnant of pagan times we were told. Even so, we children who attended the Christian school felt very much out of things during kermis week, though valiantly we tried to realize our own worthiness for the first couple of days. The only consolation we had was that during this week we were allowed to roam at will in the fields and in the half-submerged, half-reclaimed regions beyond

the outer dikes. But the mad music of the kermis reached us there, and the moaning of the sea and shrieking of the gulls weren't sufficient to drown it. Sometimes we went to visit relatives in nearby towns, towns that were so different from ours because they had no sea, no fisherfolk, but trees, and occasional windmills, and storks that nested on wagon wheels placed expressly for them on the roofs of houses.

Wierum didn't have one single windmill, and only an occasional backyard tree, except on the big farm estates and in the rectory garden outside of town. But mills and trees weren't particularly glamorous to us at such times, even though we could still be entranced by the group of fourteen elms between Wierum and Nes which we called the forest, and where we felt like cave-men or Indians or wood spirits, as long as the kermis music didn't come drifting across the level fields to find us even there. We hardly yielded to temptation, however, at least not till it was practically forced upon us and we didn't have the physical strength to fight it. Every so often, we were taken on the merry-go-round or to one of the other concessions by tender-hearted fisherfolk, who sympathized with our suffering, and saw to it that we were captured bodily and subjected to these sinful joys. It happened rarely, however, and when it did Mother would always say: "But it wasn't necessary to be so close to the tents of the wicked, was it? And wherefore are you wearing leather shoes but to help you flee from evil?"

On the day when the kermis was due to arrive, the quay along the canal was lined with children all filled with the wildest anticipation. Attendance even at our Christian school was well below par that day. Then upon signals from watchers atop the dike, the children would rush out of town along the banks of the canal to meet the gaudy kermis boats with their fascinating cargo. The kermis folk would throw out ropes and the children would pull the ships up to the place where they were to be moored. The very best we could do, however, if we weren't in school or already bundled off to out-of-town relatives, was to watch the triumphant entrance of the kermis boats from the dike.

There was no great evil in sitting on the dike and watching the tents, booths and merry-go-rounds go up. There was no music as yet, nor any dancing or capering to make the event wicked. However, no sooner were the banners raised than the town would be in turmoil to the tune of the cheap jangling music. From the inns would come equally blatant music, interspersed with loud thumping sounds. We knew then that the peasant dances were in progress. Just how those dances were performed, we were

never allowed to learn. All we knew was that at intervals of approximately five minutes there would come a terrific thud, as if the whole assembly of dancers had jumped from the attic down upon the dance floor with their wooden shoes on. Then the house would shudder, and the music would soar, while we lay in our wall beds listening with a mixture of rapture and misgiving, counting the time till the next thump came. The more tantalizingly cheap music from the kermis booths would wedge itself between the inn music. "How do they dance, with what, with whom?" we'd ask our parents eagerly. They were always very vague, however, and were suspicious of our interest in such affairs. No, the dancers didn't wear wooden shoes. No, leather ones. Just visit the town's cobblers and look at the piles of split and worn-out shoes after the kermis. For weeks the cobblers would be kept busy repairing the shoes that had simply burst asunder during the furious dancing. "But remember that the devil is dancing with them," our parents would tell us. It was no wonder, therefore, that I always pictured the devil as a particularly adept dancer, whirling about like a dervish, and grinning evilly when he saw the poor people's shoes split asunder.

Sometimes the attendance at school in the afternoon was so meagre that we were let out early if we promised to stay away from the kermis. Obediently but reluctantly, we'd go sauntering along the canal banks, with occasional side excursions to mock a fallen drunk. Or sometimes we would find a more active, vociferous one, and perhaps only with subconscious intentions would follow him back toward the forbidden grounds. After all, we lived in the heart of town, and there wasn't a street by which we could approach home that didn't have something of the kermis on it. And we would stand helpless in front of slightly tipsy fishing folk who would look at us and cry: "Oh look at the poor worms. Bereft of all that's good. See how their parents are cutting the very life out of their souls." Sometimes we would dodge them for a while, but we were never quite so adept at it as when the kermis wasn't in town. When we came home, we always confessed. Someone else was sure to bring the report home, anyway. In the evening we repented, and sincerely, too. Life became very complicated, however, and sometimes we wished we didn't have relatives in nearby towns where we had to be amused by the windmills and trees.

The kermis usually came just after Father had been away, doing the military service that was compulsory in Holland for all grown men. We always hoped that he might be kept at it a few weeks longer, so that we wouldn't have quite so much parental

supervision during kermis time. He usually got back in March, however, complaining bitterly about the weeks of work he'd lost, and swearing he would take us all to America where we boys wouldn't be subjected to such indignities as compulsory military training. By law, he was not only obliged to serve his own full term, but also had to serve another for his deaf and dumb brother, Uncle Meindert.

Still, kermis or no kermis, it was always good to have him back with us. The family always seemed rather rudderless and inconsequential when he wasn't there, and completeness and real security seemed re-established only when his blue uniform, his shako, his sword the rifle were once more hanging in their familiar corner in the attic, behind the green-flowered curtain. We especially appreciated his presence on the final day of the kermis, during which he invariably took us for a hike through the fields. In retrospect it seems that we always felt languorous and nostalgic on those occasions. It was always the best possible spring day and the clouds were larger and whiter than at any other time, the firmament infinitely higher and all the flat land greener and more lush. Very frequently we would have to make inroads in the food basket to keep our spirits properly attuned. Also, at nearly every bridge or turnstile, we found an excuse to drink from our bottles of marble-beer—a non-alcoholic concoction which had a glass marble in each bottle. The marbles could be extracted only by breaking the bottles, and, since the returned bottles were worth ten times as much as the marbles, we were only allowed to break them on this very special day.

Intermittently we'd loiter on the mysteriously quiet canal banks to listen to the comical croaking of the gaudy green frogs. Or to search out the skylarks caroling almost invisibly high above us until they plummeted down, still singing, close to our feet. The cuckoos exchanged their dolefully tender questions and answers across our horizontal bodies, and the great storks would fan disdainfully past, their beady eyes bemused but hostile. It was always good, and Rem was subdued and impressed. Then we'd rise again, singing together, we'd go sauntering on past the richly burgeoning acres, the blue rectangles of flax, the golden linseed, the grey peas already heavy with purple blossoms. For once we could walk through the country in safety, because Father was with us and no one would dare to chase us off their land. In safety, too, because all the land-workers except the most pious were at the kermis on this, its last, most boisterous day.

Soon we'd be facing the up-tilted bridge and the always crooked windmill half hidden behind its screen of willows. Then



Father would start telling us about his life as a soldier. Out there in the country he never seemed really bitter about it. He'd tell anecdotes that were amusing or full of adventures, but always, just before we continued our journey again, he'd say: "But it isn't right that any man can be made to march and drill and shoot against his will. Now, in America . . ."

All this time the kermis music would be sounding in the distance, but not tantalizingly now. Somehow it became a kind of unnecessary accompaniment to these more healthy and peaceful things. Or it simply came to us furtively as if to warn us that our enjoyment was too good to last. Then we'd go scampering after Father again, jumping wider and wider ditches, discovering ducks' nests, coming upon silent pickerel sunning themselves near the canal banks. We'd look at shallow cups pressed in the long grass where hares had slept the previous night. And all the time my everyday concerns would become more and more remote and unimportant until, like Peter at the transfiguration, I could easily have prayed: "Lord, let us build tabernacles here and abide. . . ."

At last the gravely insistent evening bells would summon us home, and back toward town we'd trudge, soon beset again by the racking, raspy kermis music, which gradually started twining tentacles of unworthy desires around all our minds.

#### CHAPTER XIV

### GRANDMOTHER TRIES THE BICYCLE

THE PREVIOUS WINTER Great Beppe had decided that she wasn't going skating any longer, now that she was well in her sixties and a widow. At that age one started considering one's dignity, she hinted. She was still spry and limber, and able to keep up a good pace on skates, but a woman her age skated with her husband, not alone. Skating alone only seemed to remind one that one's husband lay in the grave, and that accordingly he deserved a certain amount of respect.

Of course, there were oldsters past seventy who still cut a dignified figure on skates. But once Grandmother made a decision, it became as unalterable as a vow, and in her feminine way she gave reasons for it only when she happened to be in the mood. Her newly assumed dignity did not prevent her from trying to learn riding a bicycle, however.

Of course, even then everybody in Holland and nearly every-

one in Wierum rode bicycles, but some of the older people hadn't yet found the time or courage to become accustomed to this fairly newfangled machine.

Still, it isn't true that my Great Beppe tried to learn how to ride a bicycle with her golden helmet on. Neither is it true that there were absolutely no witnesses—except cattle—to her first attempts. Rumour would have it that she asked the dike warden to keep all spectators from the dike, while she and God alone tackled the problem of riding the bicycle on the green semi-polders beyond. The townfolk kept making such assertions, but they were always prone to exaggeration, anyway. Besides, Great Beppe didn't get on any too well with the dike warden, and that man had a spiteful disposition so would surely have publicized the event.

It was a fine sunny day in June. The sheep, now rid of all their lambs, were getting plump again, the dike had taken off its May cloak of oxalis and buttercups, and in the blue-green polders on the sea side of the dike, the lavender gillias and blue strand asters had started blooming. The sheep had been herded between the two vermilion fences traversing the dike, those fences which marked the boundaries of Wierum. Beyond the fences the town's cows were now pastured. They were the usual large white and black creatures, by this time somewhat subdued again after their first wild gambolling of spring.

The weather was so beguiling and the town so empty that Great Beppe decided she'd better learn to ride the bicycle at once. In her girlhood days she'd owned an unwieldy and rather comical velocipede, but she hadn't taken to it very well. Now, however, all her daughters and sons, and even we grandchildren were doing most of our going about on bicycles, and she was starting to feel behind the times.

Still, it wouldn't do at all to let her unmarried daughters know of her intention. And certainly not her sons. Nor did she care to take any mere menial into her confidence, beyond renting the rusty bike of the scullery maid without saying who or what she wanted it for. Then the day had to be decided upon, and her instructors chosen. Mid-afternoons, when everybody was out in the fields or at school, were perfect. And the natural practice grounds were the polders, the flat grassy stretches behind the dike, outside the town, in spite of the cows and the network of irrigation ditches there. So she proceeded to bribe Rem and me to stay home from school, go on a mysterious mission behind the dike with the borrowed bicycle, and wait there for something to develop.

Of course, we understood our assignment and the secrecy involved. Naturally, Rem was more than willing to stay away from school in any case. I was a little worried about it, but I realized that I couldn't tell the schoolmaster or even my parents that we would be absent from classes because we had to teach Great Beppe to ride a bicycle. We simply played hookey, and all the secrecy of the adventure made it seem ten times more exciting.

We waited behind the elbow of the high dike. We had already tested the soft, springy turf, and found an excellent spot where the irrigation ditches did not run parallel to the dike. There, we decided, one could really get a flying start halfway down the dike slope, and just keep going. Of course, one would have to stop somehow before one reached the seaside ditch, a veritable canal, a fifth of a mile beyond, as it was deep and muddy, and altogether uncrossable. But if Great Beppe could keep on her bicycle for that distance, we figured she'd certainly be able to perform the even greater feat of turning to one side before she carcened into the abyss.

Then Grandmother arrived. She came sauntering along the top of the dike as if she only intended to enjoy the sun and wind and have a look at the town's cows. But she wasn't wearing her golden helmet and her lace cap; only a sort of thick knitted black cap over her shorn locks. "To act as a cushion," she informed us slyly, looking with some misgivings at the bike we were pushing toward her. "It's twice as high as it was this morning when I looked at it on the stoop," she remarked caustically. "Also twice as rusty. No doubt its squeaking will be heard way back in town and will summon everybody here."

Because she fixed us challengingly with her dark eyes, we answered: "Of course not, Beppe."

"And how do you know what it'll do once I get astride it?"

From the way she looked we decided we'd better not answer her this time.

But then she saw the cows. There were perhaps sixty of them, and they'd gradually edged closer, and stood examining us with enormously solemn faces. "And I don't like them," Great Beppe said.

We looked at the cows. They obviously didn't like us or the bicycle either: they were crowding closer, perhaps threateningly, or just stupidly. It was hard to tell about cows.

"Chase them away and keep them at a good distance," Grandmother said, while daintily, and quite unlike her usual brusque self, she started picking a bouquet of small gillias.

We started shooing the cows away. They wheeled and twisted without rhyme or reason, and we only succeeded in splitting them into two more or less equal groups. Each of us started chasing one group and managed to keep them separate and drive them beyond the first irrigation ditches, between which our grandmother would try her prowess on the bicycle. But Great Beppe threw away her bouquet in scorn when we came back, expecting to be commended for what we had done. "But that's foolish," she scolded. "Thirty cows on one side, and thirty on the other. And as soon as I start moving on that squeaky bike, they'll come charging at me and meet halfway and reduce me to mere shreds and tatters."

"But the ditches," we suggested soothingly.

"A cow can cross anything when it makes up its mind to," our Beppe said dourly, as if she'd read up all about cows before she'd come here. "And besides, even if they don't cross the ditches, I don't like their reflections in the water. It makes them look twice as many and twice as vicious. A cow's a cow, you know."

Nothing would do but that we chase the two flocks of cows beyond the second line of ditches, and then Grandmother looked with misgivings at a long row of gulls sitting humped up on an old, half-submerged pier. But she said nothing about them, and we set the bicycle upright beside her. She dusted off the seat, felt the tires, adjusted her skirts, and then turned to look suspiciously up at the dike. Fortunately, no one was approaching on top of it, neither from Wierum nor Nes, and behind it the town and all the countryside was safely hidden.

"If you'll start part way up the dike slope," Rem started to explain, "all you'll have to do is keep rolling along, Beppe, and . . ."

"Oh now," Great Beppe said, "at my age one doesn't just keep going, never," as if she'd also learned that fact from some very authoritative source.

Somehow we got her on the seat, and put her slippered feet on the pedals, and there she sat, while we waited on either side of her for further orders. "Are you strong enough, you boys? I weigh all of a hundred and fifteen pounds," she grumbled.

We assured her that we were and she said: "Well then, start pushing, but if you let go of me, I assure you your consciences will never leave you in peace again."

We started pushing. She was considerably upset because the pedals made her feet do what she didn't want them to. She really wanted to watch those unpredictable cows, even the gulls, or for

that matter the two or three white sailboats at sea, from which someone might be spying on her. But her feet were all she could watch. It was hard work pushing her, because the grass was soft and spongy. "Should have worn pants instead of these," she commented scornfully, kicking her legs beneath her black taffeta skirts. "Wonder who ever invented that old platitude that there's no fool like an old fool? And do you think I'll still land in my coffin with my bones unbroken? I hardly dare think how your grandfather would receive me if I arrived all smashed up . . ." She kept up such running comments, while we laboured beside her. Of course, somehow, just when we were approaching the deep transverse ditch, she discovered how to work the pedals, and started doing it vigorously and unreasonably.

We managed to turn her aside and stop her on the brink of the channel in which green crabs waddled and clams spouted miniature geysers, while the ebb-tide water oozed past blackly. Great Beppe stared down at it and said: "I'd like to know what *that's* doing in my path." Then she glared at us, as if she could look right through the veil of our polite behaviour into our dark, conspiring souls, and discover the dastardly purpose there that had made us dig this ditch. "What did you think?" she said. "That I needed a water hazard, maybe?"

At the time we didn't know what a water hazard was, and perhaps it didn't speak well of our Beppe's past that she knew about such a sporty thing.

We turned the bicycle and started back toward the dike, but she kept looking back over her shoulder as if she imagined the ditch could pursue her. "The tide won't come sweeping up that black hole, will it? David, you know such things, when is the new tide due to come in?" she demanded.

"Oh not for another two hours, and it won't come so fast anyway, Beppe," I consoled her.

This time we did a bit better. It soon turned out, however, that she had been right in her earlier prognostications. While we went grinding through the thick grass, the old bike set up a weird and persistent screeching; and the cows, disregarding the intervening ditches, marched several yards closer, and stood there looking both belligerent and dazed. Fortunately, Grandmother discovered the bell of the bicycle at that moment, and took great delight in ringing it. This made her forget to work her feet, but it also kept her mind off the cows. However, she absolutely couldn't co-ordinate the motions of her feet and hands, and kept swerving toward the side ditches, which, though, bordered with lovely bright strand asters, were not intended for bicycles.

"There, that was much better," she decided contrarily, when we reached the foot of the dike again. But perhaps she was referring mainly to her bell-ringing proclivities.

So it went, up and back perhaps six times; but each time that one of us pronounced her proficient enough to ride alone, she threatened to knock our heads off if we lifted as little as one finger from the controls.

Suddenly we realized that Grandmother's secret must have leaked out. Perhaps the scullery girl, worrying over the fate of her bike, was to blame. At any rate, there high up on the dike came three dainty, urbane and correct cyclers. Our aunts. With veils flowing out majestically behind them, they pedalled along with graceful slowness; turning their faces neither to the left nor right, though perhaps that was the wisest thing to do, as the narrow path on top of the dike was a precarious track to be riding on. Slowly, stately, they approached, they were abreast us, and they went by. Still, it was obvious that they knew what was going on; they were dutifully keeping an eye on their mother, though none of them betrayed it by any glance or gesture.

As long as they were in sight, Beppe refused to mount the bike again, but once more was busily picking gillias, muttering strange imprecations to herself. Meanwhile we on our part pretended only curiosity in a strange, old, somewhat rusty bike that just happened to be lying there.

Then all our aunts reached the far vermilion fence at the boundary of Nes, and disappeared down the land side of the dike. "If they come back," Grandmother threatened, "I'll charge them on my bike, drive them right off the brim of the dike. Now, who told them? You?"

"No, Beppe, not we," we answered honestly.

"No, of course not," she snapped, "That's woman's work."

Once more we got her upon the bicycle, and again we started pushing, while she tinkled the bell mightily and the cows wheeled and stumbled round us. Then suddenly we saw another cyclist approaching on top of the dike. It was Father, and we wished above all that we could keep his identity from Great Beppe, but she'd already recognized him, and was snorting something unintelligible. Father, too, rode by, as if we were mere ghosts and he could look right through us. He too descended the dike at the distant vermilion fence.

No sooner had we started again, than still another cyclist hove in sight. Our deaf and dumb Uncle Meindert. And his emotions were less under control than those of the others. He stared our way with genuine anxiety, even raised a hand tentatively. But then,

perhaps because he was nonplussed by Grandmother's genteel act of picking flowers, he, too, continued going.

Grandmother stood erect again and said: "Do you really think they're that much concerned over me? Or is it just plain nastiness on their part? Now I can understand why Charles V of Spain staged a mock death and funeral to see what people really thought of him. Or is it that what we're attempting is so dangerous that perhaps I'd better give it up. Is it?"

"What, Beppe?"

"Dangerous to go against the laws of Nature and gravity, and try to conquer this thing." She pointed at the bike.

"Well, Beppe, sometimes," we hinted diplomatically.

She shook her head: "You've been brought up too politely. Why not just tell me I'm an old dodderer, so I could have the pleasure of slapping you down for calling me that?"

Without answering her, we started pushing once more, and this time, knowing it might be our final chance, we surreptitiously let go of the bicycle, and Grandmother actually wobbled along for some ten yards under her own power. But then the ring-leader of the cows, unable to restrain itself any longer, suddenly took a stand right in Beppe's path, with head lowered menacingly, feet pawing the ground, and tail raised in a vindictive manner. Beppe tinkled her bell frantically at it, then shouting "Enough is enough," practically hurled herself off the skidding bike. "Even the cows can tell there's something radically wrong here," she growled as we made a pretence of going to pick her up and yet, at the same time, managed to keep our distance.

And that was the end of our Great Beppe's bicycling. After we'd shoosed the cows away again, we started back home, while she picked another bouquet, and even found a little shore bird's nest, which she exhibited with such aplomb that it immediately seemed to become the real reason why Grandmother had taken a stroll out to the polders.

But, I repeat, she wasn't wearing her golden helmet. And all her children except two married ones from out of town had been watching over her. And Great Beppe announced that very evening that she was resigning herself to a dignified and staid old age. Which in turn encouraged our aunts to pursue their campaign against Grandmother's liquor shop. At least, they tried to limit her to selling only to the best people in town. They didn't get anywhere at all.

## INTIMATIONS OF AMERICA

ALL THIS TIME, almost in spite of myself, I gathered quite a few definite notions about America. Those, however, which I learned orthodoxly from newspapers, books and atlases, never seemed quite as tantalizing or colourful as the ones bootlegged, as it were, right on Wierum's own streets.

During the previous year some of our relatives had moved to America, and now their first reports started coming in, even though these reports seemed largely concerned with a very small morsel of American soil called Fox Lake, Wisconsin, names which seemed so risible that at first we were incapable of taking any news about them seriously. Phonetically pronounced in Dutch, the name Lake was synonymous with laughter itself. And Fox was equivalent to the name of a person, Foks, an extremely lugubrious local female much given to attending funerals and so utterly incapable of laughter that the combination of Foks and Lake couldn't do anything but evoke levity.

On the whole, of course, it was assumed that one moved to America for "reasons," and mysterious reasons withal, frequently unmentionable before us children. One usually went there to escape from one's conscience, from the law, debts, or some moral stigma. And once there, one kept going far into the unknown interior of America, so that one's name and fame soon became rather apocryphal. That such people would be heard of later as living in amazing opulence, flaunting gold watches, gold teeth, and gold bracelets, simply added weight to the commonly accepted belief that in America everything was achieved at the expense of one's moral integrity, patriotism and religion. It was all rather complicated, and especially so to us children, because the fisherfolk gave their own interpretations to such matters, and preferred to see everything as through a glass considerably flawed and tinted.

Now, to confuse matters still more, our cousins in America started sending us a whole series of pictures of American state capitols, without giving us the slightest hint what they might be. My atlases were of little use in enlightening us about this, and I had never specialized in America, anyway, much preferring the Eastern Hemisphere. From the few maps in my possession which showed America at all, I got the notion that the country was divided into three large parts, the northern blank expanse called



Canada, the central one, almost as blank, perhaps, called Mississippi, though that name might conceivably refer to the river winding through it, and the southern portion even more vague, called Mexico. But nowhere could I locate the lovely state names mentioned on the post-cards.

Since my very faulty little dictionary gave no translation for "capitol," but persisted in translating "capital" instead, I decided that the former must be an American idiom. On the other hand, the post-cards all showed domed buildings, invariably gilded, even more sumptuous than the palaces of most European royalty. No wonder that I chose to be convinced that they must be royal palaces, perhaps owned by American Indian potentates, since America was supposed to be a democracy. At that point, a rather senile great-uncle told me in all earnestness that since a very bloody civil war resulting from the book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, all the southern part of the United States was governed by Negroes, who were extremely civilized, and reigned as potentates over the subjugated whites.

It was time, I decided, to do a great deal of reading about America at once. I was nine, and it was time that I should know something about the land my cousins lived in. First I read a Dutch version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, mainly to learn how the blacks came to dominate the whites. In it were several illustrations, and those depicting Simon Legree were veritable sieves of pinpricks, as the result of my mother's reading when she was a girl. The book enthralled me, though it didn't throw much light on modern America. Then I tried to sneak one of Mark Twain's "un-Christian" books into the house again, but was detected before I could even start reading it. The third book I did manage to read on the sly; I had gathered from my first glance at its illustrations that it too was hardly "Christian." It was a hair-raising book, full of murderous Indians, who by some optical illusion or by sheer necromancy marched together through the American forests by the thousands, yet appeared to the naked eye of the uninitiated as one single friendly redskin, until the whole crew jumped upon you and massacred you in the most exquisite fashion. Then upon my mother's advice I read a life of President Harrison written by some pious parson, who declared that this worthy man was comparable in many ways to pious Oom Kruger of South Africa. However, the good man of God threw little light on America in general.

Of course, we too were going to America some day, surely. If only Father would stop vacillating between the Transvaal and Michigan. Our family, of course, was going to America for strictly

wholesome reasons, we gathered. And because there were so many opportunities of every sort there, we'd dare all the material dangers which had defeated so many other emigrants. Family matters were never discussed before us children, however, so that we cheerfully took for granted that whatever our parents decided to do with us would be all for the best.

When I had exhausted all the permissible reading matter about America in Wierum and had become none the wiser, I had to fall back on the personal gossip and stories about America that were current among the townspeople. Some of these I personally considered pretty fallible. Some were obviously humorous. The town still gossiped about a simple couple who were going to follow their son to America right after the San Francisco earthquake. Perhaps the son had written them too graphic descriptions of the earthquake, intimating that in Biblical fashion the earth had swallowed up nearly everything. At any rate, the simple-minded parents, when they got ready to leave, were going to take with them two large boulders and two large earthenware crocks. The former were to weigh down the pickled beans to be packed in the latter, because what with things the way they were in America after that earthquake, there might be a new crop of beans by the end of the summer, but there certainly would be no boulders, as they'd all been swallowed into the maw of the earth.

Then from the fisherfolk I also knew about a married though childless couple, who presumably had gone to America because the country's fertility was reported to be so contagious. It had proved to be so much so that the man, as soon as he set foot in New York, simply disappeared with a strange woman, leaving his barren wife to weep her heart out on a herring barrel on the New York docks. Immediately the fisherfolk in town had started taking up a collection from door to door, and dispatched the proceeds to the poor woman, who must have received it, because she, too, promptly disappeared.

Only recently, however, she was reported to have been seen in that fantastic town, Chicago, wearing a hat with such an enormous plume that it actually dipped down to her heels. Also, the tale would have it, she was now married to a Mormon, who seemed to have rescued her from an even worse fate. Our town's retired sea captain, especially drunk for the occasion, held forth on Mormonism and its pitfalls right on the dike steps. I was one of the most earnest listeners, though when I repeated at home what I had learned, Father told me I had committed a sin in listening to such a sinner, drunkard and liar.

What, then, was I to believe? As luck would have it, that very

spring some real Americans came to Wierum. I figured they must be real because they couldn't speak a word of Dutch, nor had they been born in Holland or any of their ancestors before them. They were two young women, sweet-voiced, beautifully dressed, who tripped about on high heels. They stayed with us for three or four days, singing to the townfolk in the square, taking little excursions with fisherfolk in their boats, and sleeping every morning until the unheard-of hour of noon. They had the whitest teeth, and the most charmingly bold ways. Certainly these young ladies were the quintessence of feminine America, I decided.

Alas! they were followed a few weeks later by another American female, who was reputed to be a distant cousin of distant cousins of ours, and hence at times somewhat our guest. I didn't like her. She was dark and dour, she wore forbidding spectacles and twisted her untidy hair into a series of unbeautiful buns. Her complexion was, according to my modish aunts, most unfashionably tawny. In fact, it was almost brown, so that my brothers and I privately decided she was part Negro, as was naturally quite possible in America.

This dowdy female, to whom the fisherfolk took an immediate dislike, was fanatically religious. She lectured in twisted Dutch, presumably about America, though her discourse was mainly against alcohol. I learned for the first time in my life that alcohol was the root of all the sins against the Seventh Commandment, and perhaps of ninety per cent of those against the fifth, sixth and ninth as well. America was evil, she said. It was wanton. But even in America the seeds of piety and chastity and non-alcoholism had fallen into fertile soil. She presented us with American prohibition tracts, which though otherwise undecipherable, depicted America on the cover as a fallen man in dungarees and cowboy hat around whose body a dragon called Alcohol was coiling. So I learned that America was like that, too, and horribly so.

For the rest of her sojourn among us, she tried to collect money for the good cause in America, and spent hours daily in our graveyard reading the pious inscriptions and jotting them down in a little notebook. Then suddenly she demanded to see our "slums," and when she was honestly told that we had none, she suspected a nefarious plot against her. At the end of their wits, the obliging townspeople finally produced a slum, in the shape of the five or six old houseboats just outside our gates, and which had been allotted to us by the Government. She was appeased and immediately found evident among them the unmistakable ravages of Alcohol. She lectured the houseboat dwellers, who

were over fifty per cent imbecile, senile, diseased and non-Dutch, and were further distinguished by having among them a man who spoke only German and who had had his nose bitten off in a street brawl in that country. Then she distributed her tracts among them, whereupon they naturally spat upon her and threw stones at her, because they'd expected her to give them money. And so, suffering for Christ, the American woman rooted out our one poor policeman from his hiding place on the other side of the outer canal and demanded that he mete out justice.

Justice was perforce meted out. International harmony might have been at stake if it hadn't been. The worst offender learned one morning that his leaking, propped-up boat must be towed to the confines of another town, since he had offended our citizens. Then, at considerable expense and inconvenience to several of the more reputable men of our town, the infamous boat was gently ushered away. Fortunately, the zealous American departed soon afterward, glowing with good deeds, because America was calling her.

She was followed, late the same year, by an American preacher, equipped with lantern slides and a message. He caused a great controversy, because his doctrines classified him as neither of our old Reformed Church nor of the reputedly more pure Gereformeerden. Both Churches, however, considered themselves to be the exclusive dwelling place of the Lord, and wouldn't allow anything as worldly as lantern slides to desecrate His tabernacles. The preacher, on his part, refused to be shunted off into the tents of the wicked. He declared that he'd come to Wierum to address himself exclusively to believers. It seemed that there were multitudes of believers in America, even more than the 144,000 mentioned by St. John in his Revelation, and that all of these were anxious to shake hands across the ocean with our own believers. Eventually he showed his slides in a large barn. To my grievous disappointment, however, they dealt with Paul's missionary journeys in Asia Minor, and had nothing in them at all about America.

Still, from his lecture, apart from all ecclesiastic information, we learned that America was almost exclusively an artificial country. Everything that could be made out of iron and steel was done so at the expense of Nature. Americans, it seemed, hated Nature, especially slow-growing green things. They liked breath-takingly tall buildings, dizzying bridges suspended on steel ropes, and terrific speed. In fact, they liked artificial things so much that in a region called Florida, where there were supposed to be palms like unto those in Palestine, the Americans had replaced

those faulty natural palms with synthetic, hand-made ones. This astounded me considerably, but it is just possible that the good man spoke only metaphorically. At any rate, I learned that there were palm trees in America, which I had never known before.

During the next winter my researches concerning America had to be suspended due to lack of new material. Of course, credulity can go just so far and no further, and I had always had the reputation of being a young sceptic. But my credulity was to meet its supreme test the following spring in the person of one of our former townsmen who had migrated to America the very same year I'd been born. He had now come back for the first time to show off his American splendour. He was there in the flesh, and so I had to accept him and what he wore and what he said. A returning townsman, a native-born Wierumer, wrapped from ankles to chin in a bearskin coat, had to be accepted as the truth.

It was early May and fairly warm for our northern regions when I first set eyes upon him. There, swaggering down our own Carcass Street, came something which might be masquerading as a bear, though the yellow shoes beneath and the sombrero above made such an assumption doubtful. This furry apparition was followed by a score of the town's kids, and I could tell that it could move its mouth and speak because it uttered words, and its jaws chewed—and not upon tobacco, the disillusioned fisher-folk could already tell you, but on something called “gum.” Gum was dope, some people hinted. As for me, I decided that this creature chewed the gum to keep a high polish on his golden teeth, of which he had four, shining dazzlingly in the bright May sun. But what to say of those shoes, with reddish-yellow buttons on mustard-yellow leather? And that coat? “Shot it myself,” the oracle told anybody within hearing. “All over America; bears as big as mountains. You open the window of your privy, you squint your eye, you pull the trigger, and there's a new coat for you and a hundred pots of luscious bear meat for your wife and children.” We gaped at him. “Just look,” he continued, opening the coat to display a wrinkled blue serge suit, and incidentally three gold watch chains. “See, there are the bullet holes.” And holes there were; they looked like moth holes, but who were we to doubt him?

By this time the crowd had swelled until it congested all the narrow end of Carcass Street. Spectators leaned from windows and across their half-doors. “That hat? Oh, I shot that off a Mexican bandit. No laws in America, you know, except your own,” he elucidated, carefully selecting one long black cigar from

a row of seven in his vest pocket. "American cigars. Made of dynamite."

Suddenly he produced a stereoscope from the depthless pockets of his voluminous bearskin coat, but before demonstrating this wonderful contraption, he scattered a handful of pennies—Dutch pennies, unfortunately—on the pavement, and with benevolent amusement watched us children scramble for them. "If I ever see you stoop down again to grab a fool's pennies, I'll lay you across my knee and spank you unmercifully," my father told me later, more vindictively than I'd ever heard him.

When we'd gathered up all the pennies, the man flourished his stereoscope, and then pocketed it enigmatically once more. He began to talk again. He was inexhaustible. In spite of the wild Indians whom he killed daily, and the bears which he seemed to shoot weekly, and the Mexicans which he occasionally popped off for diversion, we learned that his usual habitat was Chicago. "Of course, you've heard of Chicago. Some of you surely?" he pleaded. "The biggest, greatest, highest, fastest, wildest, loudest city in the world," in case we didn't know. More wicked than Paris. To prove it he shouted a sentence or two in English. American wasn't English, he also said.

He produced the stereoscope once more, this time with a fistful of pictures. "I'll show you Chicago some day. I've got Chicago right here," he announced. "Just a few pennies, and through this I'll show you the wonders of Chicago." We stared, we yearned, our hearts were breaking to see Chicago. Then suddenly he started to elucidate about Chicago. Free of charge.

Even then I couldn't help but be impressed by his perpetual interest in privies. We gathered that one of the most exciting things to do in Chicago was to go scooting over that city's rooftops in a car, usually fifty stories or more up, at the cost of an American five-cent piece. For that five-cent fare you could actually even go to the privy which was part of the vehicle and could relieve yourself fifty stories in the air, while you kept zooming along over the most intimate dwellings. From them people seemed to be emerging perpetually in half dress from their privies, frightened because the car was a constant terror to them. Of course, he didn't consider it necessary to explain to us that the "cars" he was talking about were trains or trams running on elevated tracks. To us a car was either a handcar or a little cart. So it was no wonder that we all aspired to being propelled through the air, without tracks or wires, in a small one-seater scooter, which for some droll American reason had a privy

attached to it, and which made mischievous sallies against all the other privies in Chicago.

So that was Chicago, the greatest, wildest, fastest city in America. And though my parents pronounced the man to be an arch-fake, I decided that where there was smoke there must be fire, and where there was a bearskin coat, Mexican hat and gold teeth, well . . .

Meanwhile letters from our cousins continued to shed light on certain unimportant corners of America for us. The aspect of these was exclusively rural, without Indians and even without bears, but with insurmountable mountains of snow, incalculable degrees of heat, and stupefyingly tremendous spaces and distances. And the new language was awful. Of course, it was supposed to be English, but it was extra-extra English, we gathered. And all the houses were built of wood instead of brick. Impossible, and so confusing. Also nearly everybody in America was of Dutch origin. In churches and schools one heard and learned Dutch. But some English, too, which it seemed, came in handy, because if you didn't know anything about that language, all the Welshmen, Scotchmen, and Irishmen who lived around you would cheat and skin you unmercifully. Of course, our cousins never even hinted that their particular little corner might be quite different from the rest of America.

One of my cousins, who was as old as I was, advised me to start learning English at once, no matter how opposed most Wierumers were to that language. And what could be better than to start on the American national anthem? So he had decided to come to my aid by copying out for me the first two stanzas of "America," because that song seemed to be merely an English version of our own "Mijn Dierbaar Plekje Grond." Of course, he forgot to inform me that only the tunes were similar: the words were entirely different. Perhaps he hadn't caught on to that.

His was a private letter, and I kept it private. Some day in the near future I planned to surprise the family, preferably during dinner, with a whole peroration in flawless English, learned from the American national anthem. Naturally, I made little headway, and I soon decided that either my dictionary or my cousin was completely crazy. One hated to suspect one's own flesh-and-blood cousin, however. So I simply hid my failure deep within my secret soul. I evidently wasn't a linguist. And I resigned myself to learning more about America the Wierumer way, from gossip and fantasy and distortion.

## THE FEAST OF SINT NIKOLAAS

THAT LATE AUTUMN, several weeks before the Sint Nikolaas feast, some of the fisherfolk came to my father and asked him if he would allow them to *Sinteklaas* (Santa Claus) to Rem and me. And my father, with one eye on his business, and another on the easily offended social feelings of the fisherfolk, gave his consent. Of course, their request meant first of all that our family was now fully accepted again as native Wierumers. Also, it meant that, though we were technically landlubbers for reasons largely concerned with Father's business, we also belonged to the fisherfolk by adoption. Father must have known that we were in for a considerable ordeal; and later, Mother declared that business or no business, offended social feelings or no offended social feelings, she on her part would never allow anything of the sort to happen to us again.

But at that time there was great good feeling between our family and all the townsfolk. The fisherfolk had been helpful and solicitous through all that succession of grave illnesses that had struck our family. Even now Meindert was just recovering from a third or fourth siege of pneumonia; but the fisherfolk argued that we needed diversion, though Meindert himself was too young to be *Sinteklaased*. The new schoolmaster, who was soon going to throw our entire town into turmoil and divide it into two hostile camps, hadn't as yet arrived with his semi-Belgian ways and his mental aberrations. It was easy to feel friendly and expansive.

Of course, we older children had learned by this time that in Wierum the Feast of Sint Nikolaas was celebrated in a wilder and more violent way than in the large cities such as Groningen. There, on the eve of Sint Nikolaas, the good saint and bishop himself, in full regalia with mitre and staff, and seated in a noble carriage drawn by two beplumed, dappled horses, would ride in great dignity through the streets. In the meanwhile his blackamoor servant would distribute presents to those children whose parents were sufficiently weathy to avail themselves of such pomp and splendour, no matter what their religious creed might be. In Holland, in some incongruous way, everybody became a Catholic in his reverence for the good saint.

The Wierumers, naturally were scornful of such fancy, class-



conscious frumpcry. Furthermore, it was nothing but unalloyed papism, perhaps to be condoned by equivocating city minds, but not by our one hundred per cent undeviatingly Protestant ones. Besides, Wierum always managed to do to excess what other towns did in moderation. Hence the sainthood of the saint became a complete travesty in our town, not exactly sacrilegious, but definitely earthy. Long ago someone had invented a *Sintlazij* (a Mrs. Santa Claus) who, very humanly, out of jealousy of her husband, went into the business of gift-giving for herself, even though her presents had something indescribably feminine and practical about them.

The Sint Nikolaas feast was celebrated for children on the evening of the fifth of December, and for adults on the sixth. It was never held on Christmas Day like its American corruption. For us, Christmas was strictly a churchgoing day, one for humbly reverent worship only. Three weeks before the feast, all baked goods, including breads, rolls, buns, scones, and cakes, lost their usual appearance, and were metamorphosed into shapes more or less recognizable as ducks, roosters, cows, pigs, trees, houses, and ships. The fanciest ones, however, represented St. Nick and his missus, the one wearing his mitre, the other her Empress Eugénie feathered hat.

Every woman who owned a shoulder yoke on which to hang two enormous baker's baskets automatically became a *Sintlazij* herself, and peddled the festive baked goods from door to door, for a nominal price. The five bakers in town worked day and night with their servants, wives and children also pressed into service. Because of our father's building business, every citizen in town was one of his customers, hence every woman selling cake and bread had an economic right to come to our door. And each one had to be purchased from, even though she hadn't had as much as one new tile put on her house; any severe winter storm coming from the North Sea might make her a potential customer. Sometimes as many as twenty-five such women would present themselves at our door in one day, with the result that every shelf and cupboard in our house was filled with Sint Nikolaas breads, cakes and tarts. Those exclusively dedicated to Mrs. St. Nick were almond-flavoured and were intended solely for the grown-ups; the others ran the gamut of all flavours and shapes imaginable.

So for weeks we ate ducks, swine, saints and windmills. The bakers tried to outdo each other in turning out new shapes and creations. Since most of these had to be twisted by hand, and hastily, some of the concoctions were fearful, and the raising of

the dough at unexpected places made the final result even more grotesque. The eyes of animals and saints were orthodoxly represented by raisins or currants. So it was no wonder that one of the new creations my mother bought from a *Simlazi* at the door struck me with grave misgivings. It was covered with eyes. And in those days I was an ardent student of the Book of Revelation of St. John, in which there appeared many an evil beast filled inside and out with eyes, beasts ever ready to spread famine and corruption. I recognized this beast at once, especially since (by accident or deliberate intent) it had at least six legs, making it all the more apocalyptic. I refused to touch or eat it, or to have anything to do with it whatsoever, and only regained my peace of mind and soul when Rem consumed it bodily and arose from his bed the next morning still his rosy, red-haired, robust self.

But we still had to reckon with *Sinteklaas* in person. Rather, with several of Wierum's *Sinteklaasen* that year. As the great day approached I began to feel more and more apprehensive. Naturally, we'd have our normal celebration, leaving our stockings and other clothing beside our beds in the evening, to find them again the next morning in various hiding-places, filled with gifts. In school and on the streets we'd already been pelted daily with peppernuts. Luckily none of us boys were yet old enough to be "salted off," a dire ceremony which took place when you'd reached your twelfth birthday by *Sinteklaas* time. If you'd reached that age, you were compelled to leave your clothing in front of the bed as usual. But the next morning you'd find your pockets filled with salt, and your sleeves and trouser legs knotted around long lumps of peat. You'd been salted off. On that day you were supposed to put childish things behind you and become a man. You were even expected to smoke your first cigar, while admiring or bantering relatives looked on. In the case of my friends, however, I had observed that instead of acting manly and proud, they more frequently burst into unmanly tears when their clothing yielded nothing but peat and salt.

On the afternoon of December fifth we left school with our final load of ginger and molasses cakes in the shapes of Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus, some as much as three or four feet long, and limp and flapping. Our pockets, our stocking caps, and even our hair were filled with peppernuts. As we walked homeward down the main street, we saw plenty of evidence that the fisherfolk were getting ready for the evening. Assiduously they went swaggering from inn to inn to get themselves in the proper spirit for the coming celebration, filling themselves with good fellowship and gin.

Evening came. The lamps were lighted. Then after dinner the table was cleared. With dismay, I noticed that all breakable things were being put away in safe places. Finally, we two boys were told to sit down on the long bench behind the table, to conduct ourselves like gentlemen, not to be afraid, and not to leave our posts. Then the blinds which had been drawn were opened again, and we could see the spectators in the street crowd close up to the windows to watch the show. Then, last of all, our parents went away to the back of the house. They weren't allowed to interfere.

The first apparition wasn't bad at all. We recognized that it was Skinny Impk, a garrulous neighbour from Peppermint Street who kept five bleating goats. Her disguise was of the most simple, and when she started cackling horribly, we knew it was only Skinny Impk trying to misbehave herself. She wasn't even particularly accurate at pelting us with her peppernuts, and when her sheet accidentally dropped off and revealed her usual shabby self, it was quite easy for us to behave in a dignified and proper way. If we didn't behave we wouldn't receive her present for us, which we'd already decided would be small, because she was a poor widow. It was a bunch of dried and smoked flounders which she hurled at us. Then she departed, proud of herself.

She was followed by a motley array of other fisherfolk Santa Clauses, disguised in long suits of red underwear, female bonnets, old blankets, hip boots, crude, false faces, fierce moustachios, flaxen wigs and beards made of ravelled-out rope. None of them were very original or disturbing, but the pelting of the peppernuts became more accurate, until our faces and hands were smarting, and our corner of the room was fairly snowed under with them. We realized, too, that the apparitions were becoming increasingly horrible, and from the hushed commotion in the long hall and outdoors we knew that the worst was still to come. As we survived each visitation without a whimper, we were cheered by our neighbours outside the windows. We just kept sitting there, close together, acting as Spartan as we could.

It was the fourteenth or fifteenth St. Nick which finally unnerved me. This was a headless personage, whinnying like a horse, who pushed an old green wheelbarrow right into the room. From his hairy wrists dangled bleached dead fish, and his voice was demoniacal, though I realized I'd heard it before, somewhere along Carcass Street. He started grabbing handfuls of peppernuts from his wheelbarrow and hurling them at us, howling and screeching, and suddenly I could stand it no longer. I jumped on top of the bench, screaming with fright, to the great amusement

of the spectators outside. It was the wrong thing to do, because now the monster concentrated on me, bellowing Biblical imprecations at me. Frantically I clawed my fingers into Rem's short red hair, practically begging him to show the same fear I was feeling. . . . And then somehow it was over, and Rem said to me disdainfully, "But, of course, that was Fat Sape from the back districts. Of course. . . ."

I had only a minute to compose myself for the next ordeal, which judging from the ominous sounds in the hallway was already approaching our living-room door. I could sense from the tension among the spectators at the windows that this one was going to be the climax, and I knew, too, that it was going to finish me off. At first we heard only deep grunting; then came a baleful stamping, and the clanking of heavy chains. Stealthily the door was opened and a pair of horse's ears and the horns of a cow appeared; then we saw a tangle of black horsehair, and a horrible face peering out beneath it. The face was half human, but adorned with one large bloody cow's eye, while a bluish cow's tongue flopped horribly from the slit that represented the mouth, a mouth that was moaning hideously.

This time I was too frightened even to jump up on top of the bench. I could even feel Rem getting tense. "But it's only our neighbour Sipke," my brother then whispered consolingly. "And don't let *him* get you." I knew somehow, too, that it was Sipke, but it wasn't enough to reassure me. It wasn't even enough to keep me from sheer insane terror when he parted some sort of indescribable cloak, and out of his sides tumbled and quivered and slithered a heap of actual cow intestines. That was the end.

Even before the peppernuts started pelting, I was hysterical. Never before in my life had I felt such horror, never again would I feel it so intensely. I couldn't be held down any longer, and when the creature started approaching, I clambered frantically up the windows, and would have crashed through the panes into the laughing, unsympathetic crowd outside, had Father not come running into the room at the sound of my desperate shrieks. He carried me quickly out of the room, but all that night I remained delirious, and in the morning I was quite indifferent as to what had been left in my clothes overnight.

I had again conducted myself unworthily, I realized, and spoiled all our chances of being *Sintaklaased* again. But it didn't even matter, and I didn't feel the shame expected of me.

JOY THROUGH COLOUR, STRENGTH  
THROUGH GUSTO

HE CAME, AND WE wondered; even we children did. In many ways he seemed to be a delightful change from our previous, moustache-twirling headmaster. The fisherfolk soon decided he might be a queer bird, but he was a comical one, and one so filled with curiosity about seafolks' ways, that they were delighted even with his madness. There was something natty, flashy, quick and dark about him; he was as much an alien as if he'd come straight from Brazil instead of from our southernmost province of Noord Brabant. "The poor souls down there, maybe they don't know any better," a sentimental fishwife declared, when she saw him going fishing, heading a *safari* of several of his pupils, carrying washtubs, buckets, spades, forks, nets, tackle and other exotic equipment with which no one had ever fished in our inland canals and ditches.

"Ah, the Parisian touch," my aunts hazarded, but they were probably more intrigued by the master's fashionable wife than by his own orange cravats, pearl-coloured waistcoats and cinnamon brown trousers.

He said he loved us one and all. He declared in school and on the street, that we northernmost Frisians, especially we Wierumers, were extra-tall, extra-blond, extra-nordic, extra-strong, extra-brave, but also so extra-staid. What we needed above everything else was gusto. Oh gusto . . . how he preached about gusto. Gusto in singing, in speaking, in play, in work, and especially in colours. He said that our souls were being bleached out by the lack of colour about us.

In the beginning his high spirits were contagious. When he demanded that the inside walls of the schoolrooms be repainted, the school board carried out his request at once. The central main room became apricot trimmed with turquoise, the others lively blues and sharp yellows, all according to his instructions. He removed all the old lithographs depicting representative trades and professions, and replaced them with historical battle scenes. He also had pictures of the Dutch Navy from *a* to *z*, but our fleet was so small that ten coloured prints sufficed to represent it in entirety, much to our humiliation. And we got more

portraits of royalty, and of near-royalty in all its branches. And gusto. And strength through gusto, and joy through colour. Song. . . .

On all manner of occasions he made us burst forth into song. Even the solemn and dignified Dutch rhymed psalms became exciting. "If you can't exult, shout, shout with all your blood, with all your youth," he'd tell us. And we shouted. There was much in those psalms that we'd never discovered before. Perhaps the raw colours of the walls made us slightly mad, too. But it was exciting, for a few weeks. I could shout, and I loved to sing, and in mathematics there was nothing to teach me any more, so he made me sing on all occasions. And draw. He made a special call on my mother—refusing the cup of tea she offered him, because he said it made your palate and eyeballs yellow—to declare vehemently to her that I was a jewel. "You don't understand him yourself, *Mevrouw De Jong*. You can't. You're too diffident, too pallid, but your son David is a jewel . . ." Of course, Mother immediately started wondering what was wrong with me.

Soon there were more serious indications that something was wrong with our master. His wife gave birth to a son, their first child. He shouted his joy all over town. In Wierum births and the physiological process leading up to them were still considered delicate matters. However, our headmaster was willing to discuss noisily on any street corner, with any loud-mouthed female, all the intricacies attending reproduction, beginning with rabbits, of which he had about forty at the time, continuing through dogs, of which he had a mere three, and going on right up to the crowning point of creation, Man.

Naturally, he had been duly reminded in the meanwhile that the birth of a child in the headmaster's house called for an age-old celebration ceremony in Wierum. He had to treat all the pupils in school to sugared rusks, one for each pupil if the baby was a girl, two if a boy, while any child bearing the same name as the newborn child received a double portion. Our master's name was *Pelikaan* (Pelican) a name which for some grotesque reason he was very proud of, while his first name was something we'd never encountered before, and the name he gave his new son had such a rich southern sound that none of us could even aspire to a faulty echo of it. But our master was intrigued with our ceremony, and to make up for having given his son a name which none of us bore, he announced that he was going to let everybody eat as many rusks as they could consume. He ordered heaps of them, had them smeared with pounds of butter and sugar, and he himself perched on top of his desk and started

chewing away at them furiously, to set us an example. The schoolroom became bedlam; the crackling of rusk crumbs under our feet was deafening. We had a great time, but our parents were disturbed.

He told me many a time that I was a potential Rembrandt, and day after day he made me draw more and vaster "immortal scenes." Occasionally, he'd make me get up in front of the class to sing a new song in my clear soprano voice. He didn't like my friend Leendert, however, and that disturbed me. It seemed that the minister was suspicious of our master's actions; their houses and gardens adjoined, and odd things seemed to be happening. We heard rumours, but because they were concerned with sex, we heard little that was definite. Our master told me that in his opinion Leendert was a dead worm; I defended Leendert valiantly, but being young and callow, naturally I also pressed my own advantage. Now, instead of persecuting the headmaster, as I'd found it a moral obligation to do with the previous one, I became almost embarrassed by the special privileges bestowed on me.

When I didn't raise one or two fingers expressing the need to leave the room, our master would insist that I go out anyway, and then accompanying me to the door, he'd whisper: "And don't hurry. In fact, just slip outdoors and stay there breathing in God's wonderful air. And get roses on those cheeks, boy." Naturally I couldn't help liking him, though I was very curious about him.

Soon he made me sit directly in front of his desk, where he could bestow more favours on me, and where, of course, I had a much better vantage point from which to watch his peculiar behaviour. Our desks were double, but he made me sit in mine alone, hinting he had something special in store for me. We got used to his perching on top of his desk and chewing noisily on an apple during school hours. Or to his announcing lasciviously that he had to hurry home and wake up his wife and kiss her. Or when he'd display his new son through the window, with naughty grimaces. When he was absent on such occasions I became the mentor of the class; but discipline by this time was so lax that no one heeded me in the least. Returning once during one of these scenes of pandemonium, he gave me a club, and said to the class: "I'm giving David this club, and some day when I come back into the room and I find that he's split the skulls of half a dozen of you hellions with it, I'll pin a medal on him."

And so I remained his jewel. Such a special jewel that when he started bringing his three dogs to classes, he made his favourite, a slobbering bulldog, sit on the seat beside me. It was a tawny,

big-headed beast, considerably asthmatic, and would drool constantly over my drawings. But our master said we were kindred spirits, and that dogs, apart from lacking immortal souls, were greater than men. The other two canines, a shaggy Airedale and a bleary-eyed Saint Bernard, wandered about the room, frightening the girls and delighting the boys. And more and more frequently and lustily we sang the old Psalms, especially our master's beloved rhymed versions of the 25th, 29th, 49th and 133rd.

I put up with my desk companion for several days before I mentioned the matter to my parents. The result astonished me. I was told to stay home from school; in fact, the next day I was sent on an extended visit to an uncle in a nearby town. At my uncle's I soon learned that Wierum was in turmoil; the town was on the verge of a civil war. One dawn the master's young wife had been found wandering dazedly in the fields, clutching her baby. The headmaster had marched through the village streets, declaring that the minister had abducted his wife bodily from his house. The poor woman herself tried in vain to convince the people who found her that her own husband had kicked and beaten her and locked her out of the house during the middle of the night. The wildly emotional fisherfolk immediately, without rhyme or reason, took sides with the headmaster against the minister.

Naturally, all the more respectable people withdrew their children from school at once. The enraged fisherfolk then took over the school as their own, established a new school board, and placed a guard around the school so that their maligned schoolmaster shouldn't come to any harm. At the same time the headmaster came and raised a rumpus at our house because my parents had secreted away "his jewel." It was then thought advisable that I should come back home, and at least show myself.

I returned on foot, and with some trepidation. As I walked along the dike I could see from afar that something was wrong in Wierum. Veritable crowds were moving back and forth between the school and town. In their midst I could see our master, in a cinnamon brown suit, surrounded by all three dogs. Then I realized that the parsonage was being stoned by a group of shrieking women. I descended the dike and hurried to my house by alleys and byways, and found even my father home. The situation was very serious, I gathered; even our policeman had made an official appearance, but had been chased back home, right through the canal. Something fateful was about to happen, perhaps within an hour, but my parents refused to tell me what it was. At the moment they were only sorry that they



had made me come back, and acutely worried over Rem who hadn't been home for hours.

Suddenly the town was in an uproar, and people went rushing by our windows shouting madly, gesticulating menacingly. Everywhere, other people—the better element, I was given to understand—came anxiously crowding to their doors and windows to look out. A grave man came along, holding himself very erect and stern, in the face of the townfolk who were shouting insults at him. He stopped barely long enough at our door to say to my father: "It failed," and walked on. Father immediately signalled the message across the street to Great Beppe and our aunts. And then Mother said firmly: "We must find Rem. You come too, David."

I hurried into the street behind Father, and Great Beppe came to her wicket to consult with Mother, while people rushing along the street shook their fists at both of them.

Everybody seemed to be running toward the bridge on the road to Ternaard. Piecemeal I gathered what had happened. It seemed that the proper authorities had come down to take away our crazed headmaster. Secretly, two alicnists had examined him previously and declared him insane, but somehow the fisherfolk had gotten wind of this, and blaming the minister, had laid siege to the parsonage, and given the headmaster a special bodyguard. The "proper authorities" had decided to come, nevertheless, and had already warned the "enlightened souls" in town what might be in store for them. No sooner, however, had the large black automobile appeared, and the four men in it actually had pushed the master inside, than a horde of fishwives had hurried to the Ternaard bridge and summoned all the land workers from the fields by blowing a prearranged signal on the foghorn. The land folk threw themselves in front of the car and upon its occupants, and rescued the schoolmaster once more. And now they were bringing him triumphantly back to town, carrying him on their shoulders. And in the midst of this wild crowd, breaking windows right and left, was Rem, who hadn't been recognized as an "enemy's" son, until Father tried to call to him. Then a group of fishwives, furious at finding a "traitor" in their midst, threatened to throw him into the canal until Father snatched him bodily from them. With Rem at last between us, we ran for the safety of home again.

For a few hours the townfolk's victory expended itself in noisy celebrations. After nightfall, however, we knew we could expect the worst. We children were told to go upstairs, where we'd be safe. Rem and I clung to the highest dormers, and from there we

listened to the uproar in the town below. We could tell from the steadily increasing racket that the next phase of violence was in the making. First came the sound of windows being broken, then shooting, then the angry roaring of the mob. Someone clattering by in the street shouted that the crowd had attacked the music-master's house just this side of the canal, and that he in self-defence had shot at them with his old army gun. Now the crowd was systematically moving from one end of town to the other, demolishing the windows and fences of "the enemy" as they went along.

Gradually, from the tinkling of glass, and snapping and splintering of wood, we knew that they were coming closer. Soon the steady dull thuds of wooden shoes came up Carcass Street: except for that sound, the crowd marched toward us in ominous silence. Then our windows started crashing in, and we heard the splintering and tearing of the blinds and curtains. Bricks even came hurtling through our upstairs windows. Then at last the mob violence expended itself in our neighbourhood and moved on to other parts of town.

Even the next day we couldn't leave the house. Help didn't come till two days later, because the burgomaster in Ternaard, perhaps afraid he might suffer politically, refused to take the matter in hand. Policemen summoned from nearby towns were summarily chased back, and neither the fisherfolk nor land workers went to their tasks that day, but roamed the streets in menacing crowds, daring any of us to come out of our houses. Finally the federal authorities sent seventy mounted police, who re-established a bit of order, enough for us to do our shopping, but not enough for us to linger on the streets. The schoolmaster was left to his wild ways, however, because the authorities were afraid of further retributions from the fisherfolk and land-workers.

The police were billeted among us for several weeks. In the meanwhile every one who'd had any grudge against the Christian school now sent their children there out of sheer defiance. Of course, the lower form masters had long since fled town, so that the headmaster now picked teachers from among the townfolk, a whole bevy of them, several of whom could barely read or write. He banished his wife from town, and lived with whatever woman was willing to keep house for him. The Governmental authorities claimed that technically they couldn't do anything for the time being, as ours was a private, not public, school.

In fact, the editors of our newspapers were definitely at a loss trying to explain the situation in Wierum. For weeks we were on the front page again, and patiently the papers explained that our

problem was neither political, economic nor religious, and that the parties were not aligned along any recognizable lines. One had to understand Wierum's highly emotional state, as set by the fisherfolk and abetted by the gullible landlubbers, and directed by a mere half dozen chronic troublemakers. The newspapers explained again and again that Wierum had always been a difficult and lawless town; quite primitive and barbaric.

They were more or less right. The simple explanation seemed to be that the fisherfolk had decided that no man was insane who was pleasant to them and ate their food and petted their children. Also, that no outside authority had any right to step in and take a hand in our local affairs. That the school was a private denominational institution didn't matter to them. The school was in their town, so it was theirs, wasn't it? And anybody in town who couldn't see things as they saw them, or who pretended to be of superior intelligence, was henceforth to be kept in his place. The victims of the fisherfolk's enmity came from all classes, even from all the religious faiths in town. Now they were dubbed the pale-faced intellectual foreigners.

For the time being Father's business was ruined. Oddly enough, all the bakers in town were on the side of the pale-faced intellectuals. But people had to buy bread, and so the military police were stationed at all the bakeries to see to it that things were properly bought and paid for. In fact, nearly every storekeeper in town was an enemy to the fisherfolk and their sympathizers, and the run on the few little shops which were sympathetic soon left those depleted.

The morning after the wild night, Mother had started for the tower as usual to ring the eight o'clock bells. A crowd of angry females struck her down, took the tower's key from her, and kept it till the police made them surrender it again. In any case, the land folk refused to be summoned home by a bell rung by Mother, so a few fishwives stationed themselves upon the outer bridge and blew foghorns just before regular bell ringing time to do the "correct" summoning. Of course, any suspicious vehicle that approached town was promptly halted and inspected, and strangers were summarily told to go back where they came from. Had there been a train to Wierum, no doubt it, too, would have been stopped and searched. A group of fishwives formed a special protective council, and marched all day through the streets taunting the police.

For months we didn't go to school, nor was it safe to send us to neighbouring towns. We received a bit of private tutoring from one or two educated people in town. But summer had come, and

we felt more and more curtailed, especially Rem, all of whose roamings had had to come to a stop. Autumn was approaching, and still the lackadaisical Ternaard burgomaster refused to take any final steps or to remove the now obviously insane headmaster. In the meanwhile the military police instructed Father and Mother and all the others in our class how to handle guns, and all of them were given permits to carry revolvers and ammunition. This fact was publicized all over town, to throw fear into the enemy camp. Restlessly we children waited for the bloody day of deliverance, hoping there would be a great and epic battle.

By this time some of the saner spirits in the other camp had gotten tired of the situation and were settling back to normal behaviour again, many of them expressing public regret for their previous actions. Gradually people started withdrawing their children from the school, from which even the last vestiges of order and sanity had long since disappeared. Important things were going on internationally, gradually overshadowing our local affair, even for us who were so directly concerned.

It seemed, however, that our father's business might be ruined for good, so again he started talking about America. We understood that now he was only waiting for an opportune time. It seemed the only sane thing to do, but meanwhile we had to cling to our precarious social position in town, in spite of all the police among us. A few rabble-rousing females remained alert, however, parading defiantly through town, often arm in arm with the headmaster.

Then, somehow, some one decided that the time at last was ripe. And even while seven frenzied females stood blowing the foghorn on the bridge, and perhaps a dozen land-workers came running from the fields, this time the attempt to capture the schoolmaster was successful. Two cars had entered the town simultaneously from different directions, and while the protectors of the master were busy dismantling the first, the second one had actually taken him away. The ruse worked well. The fanatical women soon discovered that their master was gone. They wailed and prostrated themselves in the gutters and on the cobbles, and immediately started fighting a new company of policemen who came marching into town.

The real clash didn't come till night, however. Armed with scythes, picks, shovels, hayforks and stones, the townfolk battled an army of nearly a hundred policemen, and were defeated. It was a brief but noisy battle. A few sabre cuts, a few stabbings, a few broken heads, and then several arrests, and by morning everything was over. The ringleaders had already been shipped to

Leeuwarden, where they were immediately sentenced to prison. And suddenly, even though a skeleton police force remained in town, we were safe once more to come and go as we pleased.

Soon even school opened normally again, though no headmaster would come to Wierum, and we had to carry on as best we could with a few lower form masters. At last even the police left, after they were sure that the town was completely subdued. As a matter of fact, the town was now rather ashamed of itself, judging from the many townspeople who came personally to our house to make peace once more. Even our poor, unrealistic preacher got a call to work in another vineyard of the faith, but not before his youngest son had been drowned in a small ditch, and the mad females in town had showered their curses upon him when he was buried.

By the time all this was over it was winter once more, and our family was now faced with the special problem of what to do with me. I had learned all that could be learned at the local school, and had even received extra instruction in mathematics and some in the simpler sciences. Father still had hopes that I'd become an architect, because I liked to draw and was rather mathematically inclined. But that meant I would have to go to a more advanced school in the little city of Dokkum, and the family doctor still declared that I wasn't strong enough to undertake the daily bicycle trips—the only possible way of travelling—to that town, some seven miles away.

And so while I gradually grew stronger, I simply received a little more tutoring in a few more abstruse subjects, in fact, in any subject that our undermasters happened to be versed in: some of the more difficult aspects of Dutch grammar, a few minor phases of Church history, a smattering of Biblical archaeology, and a considerably stiff dose of insectology. Constantly I tested myself on the bicycle, to prove that I would soon be able to brave any and all elements and pedal daily to Dokkum, where above all I wanted to study languages, in which, apart from some vernacular German, I couldn't get any instruction at home.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### JOURNEYS ON ICE

THOUGH HARMONY IN THE town wasn't completely established again that winter, the ice holiday was nearly perfect. There was little snow, and little wind, and the canals stretched

like gleaming translucent ribbons between the hoary fields. It was a time for peace and relaxation, and, while it lasted, all but the most rabid were willing to forget the feud.

There were five of us now old and experienced enough to go on a long ice trip: Father, Mother and we three oldest boys. My endurance was none too great; nevertheless, the whole family was willing to conspire against the doctor and my own nagging ailment. Then when the ice was actually there, it was arbitrarily decided to ignore both. I knew what was at stake and agreed with the others, willing to suffer anything that might come later. I started sleeping longer hours to conserve my strength, and straightened my shoulders defiantly every time I felt a twinge of belly-ache. I even prayed, and felt certain that God would withhold his chastisement for this one occasion.

On the ice I was watched solicitously by my parents, aunts and grandparents, and by my brothers. But I stood the test of the first day, and immediately was adjudged sufficiently ice-worthy to take a long family trip with the others. There were special relatives called "ice relatives" who had to be visited in various scattered towns, reached by devious canals after miles and miles of steady skating. We were going in a group, the five of us. We boys were ordered to develop our strokes properly, and practise skating in line behind each other. We were instructed to make our strokes long and rhythmical and as adult as possible.

Other winters we'd already skated to nearby Ternaard, Hantum, Hantumhuisen, Nes, Nijkerk, almost to Dokkum, which marked a milestone in one's skating career. We hadn't mentioned these expeditions at home, however, realizing how disappointed Father and Mother would be, as they intended taking us on our first long trip. So now we practised skating behind any grown man who would take us in tow, and especially avoided the technique of the fisherfolk, who wasted a great deal of energy and speed and seemed mainly intent on curving back upon themselves with each fanciful, laborious stroke they took.

One of the reasons we were going out of town was because the speed-skating contest was going to be held that day on the canal harbour. It was against the dictates of our Church to participate in these contests or even to watch them. "Competition is of the devil," Father would say succinctly, though a little ruefully, too, because it was generally conceded that he was the speediest distance-skater in town, and he was simply depriving himself of his just laurels.

This year Father once more was planning to take "the eleven cities and thirty townships trip," a traditional excursion, covering

nearly a hundred miles, with stop-overs in each of Friesland's eleven genuinely old cities. He'd skated the thirty-odd miles to Groningen alone the previous winter, snatching the opportunity just before the thaw, so that he returned ankle-deep in water, over cracking and bulging ice. But as a general rule he held that one really had to consider one's family and one's wife: no married man should go gallivanting around on the canals alone.

As an instance of this, he told us once more about that memorable time he had skated all the way to Leeuwarden alone. That time too he had had to hurry back to Wierum over thawing ice, so dangerous that he was the only one upon it. Then, just when he was going to duck beneath a bridge, a beautifully dressed, athletic-looking young woman had hailed him from the rail above: "If you can still navigate that ice, so can I. Will you do me the honour?" Whereupon she and Father had skated several miles together, going at such great speed that they couldn't see the treacherous holes in the ice ahead of them, but simply skimmed past them or jumped over them when they yawned beneath their feet. The lithe young woman behind Father pushed him so fast that he could hardly believe it. Then they had come to her home town, where she left him, remarking that he was such a wonderful skater, he must have won a lot of contests. Whereupon he asked her very discreetly whom he'd had the honour of skating with, since never before had he had such a dextrous ice companion. She then told him her name, and he realized that he'd skated with the all-time women's champion skater of Friesland. Then and there she'd urged him to enter in the province's competition with her, but Father always ended the story by saying gravely: "But no, boys, I withstood that temptation."

Though we knew that orthodox ending by heart, we were always disappointed when it came, and we kept hoping that some time when Mother wasn't present—she always sniffed suspiciously and made caustic comments about the other woman's abbreviated skating costume—he'd secretly admit that he'd really entered the contest, and won all the prizes. Alas! it never happened.

At last the morning of the great day for the trip arrived, and the youngest boys were left with our grandparents. There had been ice for three days now, firm, flawless ice, and there were going to be extraordinarily wicked ice contests in town that day, attended by much drinking. For the good of one's soul and body, it was better to call on distant ice relatives to-day. So we boys reached the ice at dawn, and by nine we were greeting scores of

aunts, uncles and distant relatives on the ice, all surreptitiously watching the racing grounds being roped off. By nine-thirty Mother arrived, and practised behind Father half an hour, to get her skating legs. And then, after Father had treated us to some hot chocolate in one of the booths on the ice, and had also provided each of us with a score of pennies for the ice sweepers, we started out. Many other family groups had already departed and more were soon to follow: the Christian families, especially, were fleeing the Sodom of the ice races. Father skated in the lead, and Mother just behind him with her left hand hooked into his right, which he laid on the small of his back. Then we boys followed behind her, holding hands in like fashion, and lined up according to size and age. Taking our strokes in unison, we forged ahead; by the time we reached the first bridge we'd already achieved the correct swing and rhythm. Gradually Father was gathering speed, and Mother was making comments about other people's skating costumes, even though her listeners were merely four disinterested males.

She began wondering aloud about the new minister who would soon be coming to our town. Would he, like our previous one from Zuid Holland, declare that skating was of the devil? It made matters so difficult, and obedience to one's shepherd such a delicate thing. Naturally, we never skated on Sundays, and left the ice an hour early on Saturdays so that we would be fit for the approaching Sabbath. But was it actually a sin to miss an occasional catechism class, or some unimportant Church function, when God presented us with such wonderful, health-giving ice?

Father answered her appropriately in rhythm to our strokes and our fine pulsing swayings, interrupted only occasionally by the exchange of shouted greetings with passing friends. But, Mother continued, of course the new minister was a Friclander, and she'd heard he had several daughters, and surely they would skate. We were still considering the pros and cons of this important matter when we dipped beneath the fourth bridge and swung past a procession of marvellously turning windmills. Mother was having such a good time that she almost forgot to show us the spot here where one winter four foolhardy—and perhaps intoxicated—young people had crashed through the ice and been drowned. Later she pointed out the old sheep dike, lined with motionless gnarled willows, which was haunted because of some event we boys were too young and too pure to understand. Just beyond that was another booth, where we stopped to partake of oranges and something steaming hot with a cinnamon flavour, and to retie our skates.



Now other canals branched off from ours, leading to other towns, temptingly. We wanted to go in ten directions at once, though our immediate goal was Dokkum. At one confluence of several wide canals we came upon Uncle Jochem, Tante Grietje, and our cousins Fokke, Tjitske and Pietje. Now we became a double procession, but Father soon proved that ours was the faster. More and more relatives, most of whom we had never seen before, greeted us at other spots, and we learned hastily about their health and any new additions to their families. "Your father seems to have hundreds of relatives, and all so distant," Mother sighed distractedly. "I suppose I haven't more than two score." Then we were given to understand that because Mother's relatives were so much fewer in number, it would be better to pass more time with them. "Besides, they're poorer," Mother added significantly. That meant, we gathered, that they couldn't just go visiting any old time they felt like it.

As we approached Dokkum, the canals became wider, the crowds of skaters denser, and the refreshment tents and booths larger and more frequent. We boys were growing tired of being so well-behaved and of skating straight ahead in close formation, except when another group of ice relatives hove into view. Fortunately, on the wide canals of Dokkum there were so many of these that our parents simply had to neglect us. There were still more relatives in town, too old and decrepit to go skating, who had to be called upon, and so we were left to our own devices on Dokkum's spectacular canals. The ironic thing about it was that there were much wilder and more sinful ice contests going on right there than those we'd left Wierum to avoid.

Naturally we managed to get into mischief. We joined up with some of our cousins, and soon we were being chased by one ice sweeper after another, all of whom hurled their brooms after us because we did not give them our pennies but kept them for the tempting things which the booths had to offer. Gradually, as our ice cousins increased, we gained more strength in numbers, and soon dominated whatever spot we found ourselves in.

It was nearing evening, with the sun ballooning red over Wierum's distant tower, when we started back again, utterly exhausted, and rather depressed by the knowledge that there would be no warm dinner waiting for us at home. It was dark when we finally untied our skates at Wierum, and Mother said. "I put a pot of grey peas on to simmer, with two smoked wursts in it, and asked the neighbours to run in from time to time to watch it. . . . But to-morrow we simply must stay off the ice, perhaps even you boys, there's so much to be done here at

home." . . . Then discreetly we learned who had won the skating contests that day in Wierum, and listened with outward misgiving to the sounds of carousing from the inns and ice booths. "It's really terrible, isn't it? Sinful," Mother mumbled. "But I can't help being glad that our own townfolk won all the prizes, seeing that someone had to get them, anyway."

Naturally, the next morning at dawn we were on the ice again. When we started out, Mother sighed: "Well, it would be a sin to stay off such ice, so I suppose you'll be seeing me on it again too, but I don't know if I can promise you a warm dinner this evening. Maybe to-morrow, well, at least when the thaw sets in."

Oddly enough, my good health held up, so that on that day we skated in a different direction and discovered several more relatives. A man who had been a violent partisan on the side of our crazy headmaster stopped us on the ice to announce that everything was forgiven—whether on his part or ours, we couldn't figure out—and hadn't everybody been a fool, anyway, and wasn't God's ice wonderful, and didn't Father want a good swig from his bottle of brandy?

Father refused, rather to our disappointment again, and the man, who had swung a scythe menacingly at us only a few months earlier, went his way, after blessing each of us separately, and telling our parents that we were the handsomest, sturdiest, swiftest and brightest sons any father could ever hope to have. Then he fell flat on his face, and after cursing a bit, thanked God mightily because his bottle was still unbroken. "You see how they are," Mother said piously, "to-day they blow hot, to-morrow cold, and so are perfect tools of the devil."

Still sitting on the ice, the man grinned conspiratorially at us, took a swig from his bottle, and started picking himself up with great dignity. Then when Father and Mother had turned their backs and got into position to start skating again, he gestured slyly at us, and displayed a handful of coins, which he indicated he was willing to strew on the ice, to see if we could withstand the temptation of dropping behind and scrambling for the coins. But we averted our eyes from the tempter, and fell into line behind Mother to continue our journey. Again we went much further and skated much longer than we had intended. On the eighth day, however, the chimneys blossomed white with hoarfrost, and during the night the thaw set in, and the ice holiday was over for the winter. Perhaps we would never see another. "I don't believe there's skating in America," Mother said. "No canals, you know. . . ." Besides, Americans would have invented something much speedier and more mechanical, perhaps for entirely artificial ice.

MEMBER OF THE SOLEMN SOCIETY OF  
EBENEZER

UNFORTUNATELY, I WAS COMING of age. Even though I felt as much a child as ever, all evidences pointed to that unpleasant fact. But there was little I could do about it, except wish that by some miracle we'd move to a city where I wouldn't have to assume life's responsibilities as soon as in our small town, or to America where I could put them off much longer.

I was eleven. Officially a boy became of age in Wierum when he was twelve, after which he put on the dress and manners of grown-ups, and started wearing a watch and smoking cigars. In general, however, one was considered to have reached the final point of boyhood when one had finished the six forms in school, which I'd already done. There was no other school in town, naturally, and only the richest and most daring parents sent their boys out of town to higher institutions of learning. In that case, one then became a minister or a Christian school-teacher. There were other professions, but they were hardly condoned, as they were not connected with the service of the Lord.

So actually I had been of age for several months. In spite of having lost almost an entire year of school because of my pernicious ailment, I was far ahead of other boys my age. Now I started regretting my own zeal in having rushed through the classes at such a speed. For some time now, with two other boys, I had been allowed to keep on attending classes mainly because my parents were willing to pay the tuition, but also because extra-form students were supposed to add dignity and distinction to the school. Like the other two boys, I spent most of my school hours drawing maps, helping the masters, feeling superfluous, and getting into mischief. Since the few favours at hand had to be divided among us three, we were more often in the way than of any help at all.

This was especially true now, since we had no headmaster and the two lower form masters had to carry the whole load of teaching as well as they could. The unending, intricate mathematical problems that I was given, simply to keep me busy, started to bore me terribly. But the doctor still maintained that I was too weak to go to a school out of town. Furthermore, I seemed too young, weak and unskilled to be of any help in my father's workshop.

Pake David, naturally, only saw in all this further proof that I was in the toils of Satan. Somehow he almost conditioned me so that I continually saw the devil working at my side. This wasn't comforting, as I took myself and my relationship to God pretty seriously. The only cure Pake David suggested was that I be put into work clothes, made to smoke a cigar or pipe, to push a wheelbarrow, and do hard but humble work. Someone in the opposite camp, however, always had other plans for me, vague and tenuous plans but enough to postpone any definite decision.

If only we'd had a headmaster at the time to tutor me, but we were bereft of everything that connoted culture or learning. Of course, there was the headmaster of the public school, a learned man, but I think my parents would much rather have set me adrift on the North Sea than to allow me to be instructed by a man who didn't reckon with God as they did.

So the months dragged on, and soon I was the only extra-form student left in school. And America still failed to become more of an actuality. The times and events simply refused to adapt themselves to my needs. On the other hand I was gradually getting stronger, and the doctor started hinting that perhaps in another year. . . . But a year was a mercilessly long time. Then one evening my parents, together with my Pake David, reached a grave decision. There was only one opportunity left in Wierum, only one place where I could still put my restless curiosity to some good. They had decided that I should become a member of the Church's young men's society: Ebenezer.

I was horrified. But I had been taught never to disagree with any verdicts of my parents, especially not when my soul's welfare was at stake. "And why don't you conduct yourself like a man, and smoke a pipe, and do like the others do," Pake David suggested insinuatingly. "His health," my mother pleaded. "How do you know, if he hasn't tried it?" Pake countered. I had tried it, I had smoked cigars and a pipe without any ill effect, behind the dike, in tannery sheds or beneath fish-drying racks. Now, however, I had to start smoking openly and like an adult. "And those little breeches," my grandfather growled, pointing scornfully at my knee-length pants. Mother immediately agreed that I should wear pants that came halfway below my knees. A compromise, but unfortunately the only one reached in the whole discussion.

That young men's society, Ebenezer! I know it was weighty, worthy and terribly grown-up. I'd never even dreamed of myself as a member of it. Of course, one automatically became a member, if one were of Gereformeerde convictions, morals and

behaviour, but not until one reached the ripe age of seventeen at least. I raised my voice feebly in protest, but that only brought down upon my head more admonitions from my pake: "What, you are so wise that even our Christian schoolmasters can't teach you anything new any more, and yet you aren't willing to test your wisdom with those who are earnest in the ways of the Lord? You're going to join, and furthermore you aren't going to simply go and sit there without opening your mouth. You have to participate in the discussions, ask questions."

"Yes," Mother echoed, "because you are a big boy of twelve . . ."

"Eleven," I insisted.

"In your twelfth year," Pake David said with finality.

I felt miserable, but also determined to see this through, even though I knew there wasn't another boy in town, even five years older than I was, who had ever been subjected to anything so drastic.

My aunts across the street were horrified; perhaps not so much because I had to join the society, but because of those hybrid-length pants mother was making me wear now. Great Beppe simply philosophized: "If you have to live in this town, and carry on business with its people, I suppose it's necessary never to give offence, not even with the brevity of your pants."

I went to the society meeting one evening, heavy of heart, slow of feet, very conscious of my timidity, my childish voice, my boyish manners. I entered the little smoke-filled consistory room of the church where the society was gathered. At first that august body simply took for granted that I had come there to deliver a message. Finally, I had to announce to a very voluble and bushily moustached local gentleman that I had come to become a member. The amazement and consternation was as thick as the smoke in the room. All eyes were riveted upon me. "Who said so?" the no longer voluble gentleman demanded.

"My father and my mother and my Pake David," I said shrilly.

"Oh," he said, and turning to the assembly, he added, "Well, Well."

Someone made room for me on one of the benches. My eyes peered blinking through the cigar smoke and lit with exquisite relief upon a map. A large, handsomely tinted, glossy map on the opposite wall. I gazed at it lovingly, as if I felt it would become a close friend. I realized soon that it was a large-scale section map of Rhodesia, Matabeleland and a slice of Mozambique. Wonderful! I realized then, too, that the meeting had not yet come to order, and so I asked immediately why that map was there, who

had put it there, and who used it. Again I received only pitying stares. No one could answer me; that map had been there for years, no one even knew what part of the globe it represented. Suddenly I felt better. I knew. Somehow, some day I was going to use it to my advantage. Now I simply lapsed into humility again.

I was amazed at the social appearance of the members of this Ebenezer Society. These were the uncouth, hefty, and often violent young men whom I'd seen plodding home from the fields, or taking their courtship walks around town, or skating on the canals or chewing and spitting tobacco. Here they were in one unctuous, self-conscious assemblage, dressed in solid black suits, wearing glittering watch chains, puffing at long cigars. They were ready to tackle the problems God had posed for them in the Holy Writ: problems of predestination and of divine and special grace, and all the interpretations thereon from St. Paul, St. Augustine, through Calvin himself, and on through the latter-day Dutch theologians. Their presumptuousness made me feel even more humble. After all, all I could offer against such theological lore was my recognition of that obscure map on the wall, which nobody cared about.

The man with the bushy moustache pronounced an important and long prayer, and then someone read the first ten verses of the second chapter of the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians, and the society started discussing what had been read, verse by verse. I remember it to this day, because I had promised that I'd give a résumé of the discussion when I got home that evening. I was also supposed to participate in the debate when I felt the spirit move me. I sat there in despair, counting the small accumulation of my years, hearing the profound words being enunciated around me in a sort of very faulty, half-official Dutch which was little better than tidied-up Frisian. There seemed nothing that could inspire the spirit to move me so that I'd ask a question. But yes, there was something after all: there in the very first verse, the town of Laodicia in Asia Minor was mentioned. A geographical hint. There was my cue, I decided, waiting tremulously for an opening in the discussion. But there were so many more worthy aspects to that chapter that the mere mention of a town near Colossus aroused no interest.

After an hour and a half of Bible discussion, there was an intermission. Someone started collecting dues, but I was told to pocket my five-cent piece again, because I wasn't yet a member. During the ensuing fifteen minutes I fixed my eyes upon the map, coveting it. It was an almost blind map, with only occasional

names of rivers and settlements in minute type. It had no title. Perhaps it indicated some obscure missionary journey; perhaps it had simply been put up to cover a crack or pipehole in the wall. I realized that all this time I was being discussed and examined over the important-looking cigars and the frequently-used cuspidors. Should I be asked to become a member? Yes, they decided, if I was in earnest about my request. No one seemed really enthusiastic, however, and I couldn't blame them. Perhaps, considering everything, including Pake David, they didn't dare to reject me.

Unanimously I was voted a member. My name was entered in their ledger.

I suddenly remembered to light my cigar and joined the smoking expertly. What effect that had on me as a society member, or on my constitution, alas! I don't remember.

I tried. I kept reaching for the stars, those solemn Calvinistic stars, which I feared might remain forever unreachable. I was really humble and anxious to learn during those discussions of God's divine plan. I understood some of it, and blindly accepted everything that was too deep for me: for instance infant damnation, divine election, supra- and infra-lapsarianism, and other intricate subjects. However, I never found any question to ask, nor any contribution to make, which in any way could help to clarify God's ways.

I tried. But only when the discussions were less doctrinal. Once in a piping childish voice I stopped the discussion dead short by asking what contraption similar to thermometers the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar had by which they could increase the heat of the fiery oven exactly seven times. On another occasion, I asked how it was possible for the big fish to spew up Jonah at Nineveh, when actually there was nothing more sizable than a river in the neighbourhood of that town. The answers I received never varied. It was all done according to God's infinite plan. And since the Bible said it was so, it must have happened so. Besides, if God willed a sea or a fish to be at an ordained spot where they could do most good for His cause, or even if He wished to show heathen Babylonians how to increase heat exactly sevenfold, who were we to question His wisdom? Naturally, I knew that answer by heart and had expected it, but I was satisfied. I had asked a question; I had done my duty.

I never learned to feel at home in our society, however. I smoked my cigars diligently, and even read the Bible verses aloud on occasions, undismayed when members with more profound knowledge relieved me of the discussion of those verses. There

were other specialties for me: papers to be written and read on the campaigns of Count Floris V of Holland, for instance, or the exploits of Jacqueline of Bavaria. I put much care and work into such papers, and read them authoritatively, but no one ever asked me any questions, and I couldn't fail to notice their condescension, because I had tried to elucidate phases of history none of them had ever heard of. My subjects weren't of immediate importance as were the theological ones, or the discussions about the inner workings of the national antirevolutionary party, of which every good Protestant of voting age was supposed to be a member. Those political discussions always seemed connected with the theological ones, and hence puzzled me more but interested me less. I was still so many years from voting age that the enumeration of the obvious merits of all sorts of obscure but conservative candidates didn't concern me in the least. I sat dreaming about rivers and mountain ranges in Rhodesia and Matabeleland instead.

Naturally there were the lighter aspects of our meetings, which supposedly should have pleased me. These were the recitations, long rhymed pieces about Christian strife and eventual glory, rattled off in a self-conscious singsong, and usually deeply appreciated by the society in general. I could have done this better than any other member, I admitted to myself privately, if I hadn't already vowed that I would no longer commit such stuff to memory.

I was unhappy at those meetings. Fortunately the society would soon start its summer recess. But soon, too, I'd have to stop going to school. Somehow, some labour would have to be found to keep me at a safe distance from the devil. "You could learn to plane planks, chisel holes for door and window sills, drive in a few nails," my father said dubiously, "That is if you were even one third as dexterous with tools as your brother Rem is. . . ."

That summer I made one unplanned, abortive attempt to run away. It turned into a dud, and no one besides myself was ever aware that I had made any such attempt. The opportunity presented itself without any warning. I accepted it without preparation. It failed with humiliating swiftness.

It happened on a Saturday afternoon. My brother Rem was having his week-end bout with the family shoes and his Bible text. But my younger brother Meindert had waddled off somewhere with a red-stock cap perched high upon his yellow hair. Where the child had found it, perhaps in the attic and filled with moth balls, Mother couldn't guess, but some neighbour had



reported that "your little slow one is crossing the square wearing a red winter cap." I was sent out to find him.

At the harbour of the canal I came upon some of Father's carpenters unloading a lumber barge. They were practically finished, in fact they were hurrying so that they could leave off work an hour or so early and dress themselves in their semi-Sunday best, and so prepare themselves gradually for the morrow. Father's workshop had already been swept and scrubbed, and lay silent and clean in honour of the Sabbath day.

It was one of those dreamy, demoralizing summer afternoons, on which even the dike with its sheep, and the superannuated fishermen on the dike steps seemed somehow wistful and ineffable, somehow indescribably remote. The canal lay dreamily reflecting the dreamy houses on its brink. All sounds travelled slowly and gently; from the inn by the canal came a bit of singing in gruff male voices. There was something faintly evocative about the afternoon, and I felt suddenly quite unconcerned about my young brother and his red winter cap.

I watched the men cart away the last load of planks. The empty barge, still smelling pleasantly of new lumber, looked intriguing. I decided to go aboard it and indulge in my vague day-dreams there. I dimly associated its owner with the voices that came floating from the inn, while I seated myself musingly at the rudder. A little while later a red-faced fellow emerged from the inn, stopped at the canal side, and looking down upon me possessively, shouted: "Well well, look at that. Somebody dropped a son and helper for me right into my barge."

He was obviously pleased by the sight of me there, and immediately started to proclaim that nature and life had mistreated him, and that the world would be a wonderful place if he only had a noble son like me, and how husky and handy a fellow I was, and how would I like to travel back with him, that is how would I like to manipulate the rudder while he did the punting?

Primarily I was amazed that anyone could find such delight in me. But there was no one else in sight. And though the man was obviously tipsy, he was pleasantly voluble, and above all, he liked me. In spite of the fact that I was sure that he was making a grave error of judgment, I suddenly decided I was going to go with him and stay with him, and so solve all of my unsolvable problems.

The man still kept on exclaiming, fretting now good-naturedly about the lateness of the hour, the hospitality of the inn, which seemed to have inveigled him into staying against his wishes, and the drowsy effect of the weather on him. Then he came aboard,

shouted some haphazard instructions to no one there, and told me to lay my hand on the rudder with all the sureness I could muster up. Then in the midst of a hundred other exclamations, which included an admonition to me not to look at the ankles of the girls on the dike because time was golden, he suddenly seemed to be ready to start out.

There were no girls in sight, as every girl worthy of her salt was helping her mother scour the house to get it ready for the Sabbath. Moreover I wouldn't have found any delight in their ankles anyway. Therefore I tried to concentrate on his confused instructions, so that I could prove myself as a worthy navigator of flat barges along crowded canals.

It took an amazing amount of work and patience to jockey the vessel into a complete turn in the tight little harbour. But finally, even though nine-tenths of his instructions had gone amiss, we were facing the right way, and the man's faith in me seemed still intact. From now on the going would be easy, he consoled me, meanwhile hopping from side to side, from fore to aft, with his punting pole, and shouting further irrelevancies at the town, as we glided—rather majestically I thought—out of the harbour, past the old houseboats with their degenerate dwellers.

As we went gliding along beside the foot of the dike with its somnolent cows, the man still announced that I was wonderful, healthy, and strong, and that I'd make him a fine son. He was having something put over on him I felt, but the drowsy afternoon made even that seem inconsequential.

Unfortunately the canal took a sudden turn there, and raucously yelling something about left and right, fore and aft, my new master managed to confuse me so that I steered the barge halfway into the low meadow, scaring up an indignant stork and a thousand or so green frogs. Instead of being angry at me, however, he considered me to be such an amazing wit for having delivered the boat into such improbable navigating grounds, that he simply doubled over with laughter, accusing me of having had one too many at the inn. After a great deal of unorthodox manoeuvring we managed to get the boat into navigable waters again, and began to make steady and only slightly zigzag progress toward the first bridge.

On that bridge, however, there was a row of boys, practising the fine Dutch custom of spitting down on anyone who passed beneath the bridge. Also the canal beneath the bridge became like an hour-glass waist in shape and narrowness, so that extraordinary prowess was necessary to get any boat through it at all. To make matters still worse, the man suddenly shouted at me

that we were supposed to go under the bridge, and not up its yellow brick sides, up which he personally intended to climb, to beat the daylight out of any of the boys who dared to spit upon him.

For the time being, the boys on the bridge were too much amazed at seeing me at the rudder to do anything but stare, and then shout down enviously at me. It gave me the necessary assurance for the moment, but then suddenly, either because I'd given the rudder a wrong turn, or because my master was too drunk to punt correctly, the blunt nose of the vessel somehow got wedged between two mooring posts. Instead of dislodging the boat, the man went in pursuit of the boys, who must have started spitting, though in my confusion I hadn't noticed that they had.

I tried to cope with the situation to the best of my limited ability, but after a little pushing here and there, I only managed to get the clumsy boat wedged tight beneath the bridge. There I waited in panic for the man to return. He came back, roaring with anger, then roaring with laughter when he found me in my predicament. Again after all sorts of impossible motions, we at last managed to get the thing headed right, and were edging it slowly beneath the bridge, when we discovered that the boys had come back and were now waiting on the other side to spit upon us.

After that came a fairly straight stretch of canal, between green and blossoming fields, where my boss started making all sorts of intimate remarks about the legs of the women field-workers whom we passed, and who invariably waved at us. I for my part started dreaming about my new future, worrying a bit because I didn't have any change of clothes with me. Neither did I want to leave my home entirely, but this was one of those turning points in the affairs of men which seemed to call for drastic measures.

I'm afraid my thoughts weren't any too sensible; they were simply being lulled by the motions of the boat, comforted by the warm sun. I had never read any books like Horatio Alger's, so my dreams weren't very ambitious, nor very definite, nor even stereotyped. I projected myself into a beautiful and golden void, through which I'd ease leisurely holding a steady rudder, while I remained always young and always secure. Of course, I had read books about boys running away from home, but in those the runaway always atoned for his sin by doing great spiritual work among thieves and murderers, just after he'd been saved from a fate as bad as theirs by the prayers of his dear mother.

"Watch out, turn coming," my new master shouted, and my

dream was dissipated by a welter of instructions. After that turn, the shipping canal managed to stay straight for only a few rods at a time, and so these lovely stretches where I'd skated so pleasantly the previous winter now became a veritable purgatory, from which I soon knew I'd never emerge sanctified. Even my master was starting to lose his patience. Perhaps the warm sun, the lack of wind, and the heavy labour of punting were sobering him up. His orders now were given brusquely and truculently, and half of the time he'd come leaping toward me, to straighten out the rudder or turn it the way he wanted it, since no vocal instructions on his part had made me capable of doing it correctly.

For my own protection, I now confessed to him that I was really deaf, and hadn't dared to tell him. This puzzled and dismayed him, and instead of shouting so much, he started gesticulating more, which wasn't always the best thing to do when he was trying to punt. He also started to complain mournfully that his life was full of troubles and turmoil, and his lot a very hard one.

Somehow I did better after that, perhaps because I could follow sober or gesticulated orders more easily. I resumed my dreams again, with variations. I was now a deaf lad, who in spite of extreme handicaps made his way triumphantly through a life in which there was no shouting nor abuse. The rudder became more of a helpmate to me. Then suddenly I realized that we were about to pass Pake David's acres which bordered the canal and I was terrified. I dared look neither to the left nor right, and wanted to drop to the bottom of the boat, but couldn't very well do so without relinquishing the rudder. Of course, Pake David had already seen me, and shading his eyes with his hand, was marching toward the canal bank, shouting; "What are you doing there, you fool? Who told you to do that?"

But my new master decided that no such abuse should be heaped upon his adopted son or helpmate or whatever it was that his addled brain considered me to be. He immediately threatened to jump ashore and shut the old man's big mouth properly.

Everything was going wrong, I realized.

But Pake David at that point only said: "You're a drunken fool. And as for your helper there, maybe you're more to be pitied than scorned."

This seemed to flabbergast my boss, who stood there dazed, watching the old man stalk righteously back to his hoe. He turned his eyes slowly, appraisingly upon me and then muttered: "Guess you are a deaf boy, guess I shouldn't have asked you to help. Who's the old crow, anyway?"

I decided to deny my grandfather and only shrugged. Thinking he hadn't shouted loud enough for me to hear, he bellowed: "I said, who is that old carp. What's he want?" so loud that Pake David turned around, as if he too was waiting for my answer. I kept shrugging idiotically, and unwittingly shook the rudder so that we did some amazing zigzagging, and my master was forced to start punting again.

But as we careened slowly along, he became more and more sober and more and more morose. I, however, was doing considerably better, especially now that I was left to my own wits, undisturbed by orders of left and right, fore and aft. Still, I kept feeling his eyes fixed broodingly upon me; even his gestures now had something of dismay about them. And then suddenly, over the silent, echoing fields the bells from a score of towns started tolling the vespers, summoning the land-workers home from their fields. We were so far away that Wierum's bell wasn't even dominant above the others, but I could differentiate it from the louder ones of Nes, Hantum and Hantumhuisen, and I could picture Mother pulling the bell rope rhythmically. For a few moments those bells sounded merely sweet and remote, but suddenly I heard a note of finality in them. I felt my throat close upon a sudden anguish of homesickness. I wanted to be out of that silly barge, away from my drunken master. I had to go and find wandering, slowly ambling Meindert with his red cap perched high upon his golden hair. I wanted to be anywhere but with this man, who was now so gloomy and full of misgivings that he merely shrugged resignedly when I missed the next turn completely, and steered the old barge up a narrow ditch, across several pickerel nets.

When we had the boat straightened out again, the man said tragically to me: "I think it's getting near your dinner-time. As for me, who cares if I perish in these fields? You tried to be a good boy helping me, but a lad . . ." he stopped talking, and gesticulated volubly. Then suddenly wishing me Godspeed, he ushered me ashore.

For a little while I was humiliated. Then I simply set out toward Wierum's grey tower and red roofs over which the sun was gradually descending, making the old town more golden than it could ever be short of some transfiguration. Suddenly I felt such great relief that I started singing as I hurried through the deserted fields. That day and that experience, however, marked the beginning of a peculiarly psychic disturbance in my mind. Even to-day, when ordered to go right, I turn instinctively to the left, even though I'm sure I wouldn't do so if left to my own wits.

The manipulation of any boat gear or controls makes me feel completely incompetent; no doubt because I still subconsciously associate it with that day's failure and humiliation.

But there I was, still many miles from home, wandering across the fields. The land-workers had already crossed the last bridges into their towns. Smoke spiralling from chimneys told that they were sitting down to their evening meals. But I had to find my way home along a maze of canals and ditches, and from the latter, now that the week's work was done, the planks had been removed, so that I had to find places narrow enough to jump across. I hardly dared to walk along the old country road, once I found it, for fear that I might come upon Pake David, lying in wait for me.

My dreams of the future had evaporated completely. But also, I knew that I could keep my failure completely to myself. Even Pake David couldn't possibly have guessed what my real intentions had been. The future still looked bleak, but the immediate need to set foot upon Wierum's familiar streets again was vastly more important.

All around me the frogs were shouting, and birds started winging away toward the few scattered clusters of trees. Then I saw a bed of tall reeds of which the plumes were waving rather too spectacularly. I stopped and peered into them, and there was Rem! I was surprised, but he wasn't. And when I hailed him, everything suddenly seemed to have become completely normal again. I wanted to tell him what I had almost done, but I didn't have the courage. After all, I had failed; if he had been in my place, he surely would have succeeded.

We started trudging home, both terribly hungry. "I didn't hear the bells," Rem proffered his old excuse. Perhaps he hadn't; the frogs were so noisy out here. He had been sobbing over the shoes and his text when I had left him. No wonder he'd wandered so far away in so short a time. "I was watching an animal, a brown animal with a dark tail," he went on explaining. We reached home long after dinner-time. But everybody simply took it for granted that I was just bringing wandering Rem back to the fold. He wouldn't be punished; it was Saturday night. If he had been, I might have broken down and confessed. Meindert had come home under his own power hours ago, still beneath the red stocking cap.

Later, I'd have to explain how it happened that Pake David had seen me in an empty barge with a drunken man. No good could come from that. But that was later. If there was any punishment to take, perhaps I'd be quite prepared to take it.

To-morrow was Sunday; it wouldn't be till Monday that such mundane matters would be discussed and dealt with.

And after that, I could go on growing up, stodgily, hopelessly, but according to the best standards of the town.

## CHAPTER XX

### A TIME TO BREAK DOWN

THEN LIFE TOOK A TURN for the better. On the last day of August, at the annual feast for Queen Wilhelmina, I won a jumping contest and was awarded a silver watch chain. Later that evening, in a schoolroom trimmed with garlands of spruce and Japanese lanterns, I declaimed so heartily that Holland was the greatest, sweetest and most cultured nation in the world, that I got second prize in the youth's declamation contest, though I was the youngest of all the entrants.

Certainly, therefore, I must be increasing in wisdom as well as in physical strength. But the devil kept stalking me, too, and caused me to be declared unworthy again and again, by those who'd always considered me that, anyway. Then I got in a fight, in the middle of the fisherfolk's part of town, and defeated someone taller, older and fleshier than I was, while the fishwives cheered from their stoops. But I was a full-fledged member of Ebenezer, and the ignominious fact that I had participated in a street fight naturally reached the ears of those who suspected all my intentions.

That fight, however, seemed strangely important to me. I had held a grudge against hefty, red-faced, slow-moving, unctuous-acting Doede for some time. Ever since our minister had left us, thus robbing me of my bosom friend Leendert, I had been the unwilling recipient of the friendship offered me by this Doede, who was considered to be socially worthy of me although we had little else in common. Frequently I was asked to go to his house, where I'd sit on the sidelines while he played with his lead soldiers, trains and battleships which I wasn't allowed to touch. All this made me furious, even though I was considered too old now to play with such boys. Doede, however, was nearly a year older than I was, and gradually I started brooding over the injustice of his behaviour while I watched him puttering around with his thick potato-like fingers.

To make matters worse, he had a loony sort of uncle who was learning to play the organ, and who each Friday had to be met at the train in Hantum. Often I would have to accompany Doede to meet his Oom Jelle at the train. Usually, those two would burden me with Oom Jelle's bag, while they walked on ahead hand in hand, chewing chocolate bonbons, which might be passed to me sparingly if the bag was heavy or if the prevalent mood was conducive to such generosity on Oom Jelle's part. I had protested about this at home for some time, but to little avail. I had to take matters in my own hands, I decided.

One Friday afternoon I did. We were still two miles from Wierum. I was carrying the heavy bag again, while Doede and his Oom Jelle sauntered blithely ahead consuming bonbons, the odour of which drifted tantalizingly back toward me. Beelzebub himself must have been riding the air waves on that scent of chocolate, for suddenly I knew just exactly what evil deed I was going to perpetrate. Just ahead of me where the road forked, the devil beckoned most invitingly. I started lagging further behind, while the others marched steadily on, consuming their bonbons.

When I reached the fork of the roads, I simply started walking up the one leading to Nes. And on that road, between willows, windmills and farmhouses, the heavy bag almost became something pleasant to carry. I kept going at a great pace till I reached a turnstile with a row of burnished milk cans in front of it and some black and white cows behind it. There I deposited Oom Jelle's bag and continued nonchalantly on my way to Nes. It was a nefarious deed, full of trickery, I knew, but I felt very good about it, especially when through the willows I could see that the other two had come to a stop and were peering back along the road to find me. When they did, I waved blithely to them and kept going.

In Nes I had a cup of tea with my Tante Grietje, and a fight with Cousin Pietje. Then when a thunderstorm started brewing, I decided it was time to continue my way to Wierum, almost assured by that time that God was sending the storm to punish me for my misdeeds. But I reached Wierum before the storm broke, and found that my parents, aunts and grandparents were much more concerned over my behaviour than over the threatening storm. It seemed that news of my desertion with the bag had already reached town, and considerably distorted versions of it were on everybody's tongue. Nothing would do in the presence of so many witnesses, but that I go to Oom Jelle and apologize abjectly. That done, I had to return to the house and receive intramurally whatever else in the way of punishment was due



me. Naturally, all this didn't increase my affection for my ordained friend Doede. Rem offered his services to do a proper job of cleaning up on him, but I brushed that aside. Twelve years old and a dignified member of Ebenezer though I was, I was going to do the job myself, when the time was ripe.

The time became ripe, as I have already said, in fisherman's town, though for the world of me I can't remember exactly what brought things to a head. All I know is that suddenly we were fighting, and that nearly all the fishwives were cheering me, first leaning from doors and windows, then standing in a close circle around us, advising me where and how to punch and maul and massacre Doede. Not that the fight amounted to anything in particular, because Doede simply lay supine on the cobbles beneath me, blubbering and telling me I shouldn't be doing what I was. In the end there wasn't anything left for me to do but get off him and watch the fishwives attack him with their brooms until they had him on his feet and on the run. Then, presumably because he had soiled the street, they assiduously scrubbed the spot where he had been lying, while one of them presented me with a smoked flounder, and another made me sing them a song. Meanwhile the heftiest one kept shouting at me: "Why didn't you kill him? We wouldn't have told on you. It wouldn't have been anything but an accident, would it, girls?" She then urged me to come into her house with her, where she'd "give me something to warm my insides." I was about to follow her, when the little one who had given me the dried flatfish whispered to me that I'd better not because: "She's as drunk as a dirty outhouse, and there's no telling but that she might want to rock you in her lap."

I laid plans for a further punitive career, and only regretted that the spectators to my first bout had been eighty per cent female. But of course, I was reminded that I could never again degrade the august adult society I belonged to without suffering the just consequences. Furthermore, the family now had almost officially decided to take me out of school and put me to work under my deaf and dumb uncle in the carpenter shop. Any voyages to America or even only to Dokkum to school were postponed again, especially now that winter was approaching.

The Sint Nikolaas feast came around again, but I wasn't salted off, presumably because this might be our last Sint Nikolaas day in Holland. If need be, that extremely final step could be taken in America, where it was rumoured to be unnecessary till one was fifteen or sixteen. It turned out to be a disconcertingly mild winter, with only two days of safe skating.

Spring came upon the land late in February, and with such a show of permanence, that the farmers planted their first crops of potatoes and flat white beans. And during that month, even though a new headmaster was coming in April, it was decided to put me into my father's workshop, largely, I gathered, to satisfy critical neighbours and relatives, but also for the safety of my own immortal soul. Father told me: "You and a saw and hammer don't see eye to eye, I know, but there is such a thing as adjustment, and when I was your age . . . Besides, who knows, later on . . ."

"I've always wanted to be an architect, I really have," I murmured defensively. He gave me a sympathetic glance as if to say that that was a matter for conspiracy between us, which in some better clime, at some more congenial time we might bring up again, but which for the time being we'd better diplomatically disregard. "But, try, really try, at this, won't you?" he practically begged me. So I decided I'd make a show of willing industry at least.

And so I became an apprentice in my father's shop. The apprentice fee was waived; in fact, I actually received the munificent salary of twenty-five cents a week, out of which I had to pay my Ebenezer dues, among other things. Great Beppe was the cashier of the concern, and even she managed to imply that everybody was doing me a great favour, paying for all the errors I would commit, and all the precious time and space I would waste.

Now life was definitely closing in upon me. America had simply been a mirage. My own weak constitution had betrayed me. I didn't particularly mind my daily tasks, but I couldn't muster up any enthusiasm for them. Sweeping the shop out, stuffing sacks full of wood shavings, turning the grindstone: those were simple. Driving nails straight, planing planks, sawing occasional boards off, became possible feats for me, but unexciting ones. Chiselling accurate square holes into window and door-sills was a better job, though a tedious one. I rather enjoyed helping Father's oldest carpenter construct a coffin and apply the first coat of black pitch. But very few people died that spring, and coffins were seldom ordered.

Before long all the work became outdoor construction. And soon I found myself alone in the workshop, often with altogether too much time on my hands, which I seldom used constructively. There seemed to be no hurry to learn new things, when it was quite possible that I might be doing this sort of thing for another sixty years. So I frittered away my time by exploring and scaveng-

ing in the old buildings and their cluttered attics, or when I knew I could slip away, by crossing the dike to busy myself with the crabs, mussels, clams, snails and periwinkles on the shore. One Saturday my beppe actually decided I hadn't earned my twenty-five cents, and put it up to my own conscience for confirmation. My conscience merely held its testimony in reserve.

When on the first of April a new school term started I felt miserable. Every time I looked at the familiar yellow brick school building I felt worse. I saw the new headmaster walk through town, and I could have fallen at his feet and begged him to deliver me from my bondage. He had an intelligent face, a neat dark moustache, and an encouraging smile; and strangely enough, he always wore a sea captain's white cap. I had no excuse to talk to him, however.

Of late I'd been working outside with the others. My particular job was helping a crochety old man to chip mortar off old bricks at a house to which a new wing was being built. I didn't like old Krist, nor did I like the work. The old man distrusted me, and contended that I was simply taking labour out of his aged hands, bread out of his toothless mouth. He was constantly morose, and his only fixed purpose seemed to be spattering the bricks I had to handle with mouthfuls of tobacco juice.

Unfortunately we were so close to the school that I could hear the familiar songs coming from it. And then God showed me a way out. There, on one of the bricks I was about to trim, clung one of His own creatures, something too leggy to be a centipede, too peculiarly segmented to be a millepede. Even if it had been nothing but a freakish housefly I would have seized this opportunity. . . . Coaxing the creature into a match box, I started off straightway for school. No one but the new headmaster was going to tell me what I had captured, and no one was going to stop me from asking him.

We got acquainted immediately. I had been right, the man's crinkly smile and intelligent eyes had been indicative of a pleasant and curious mind. He happened to be as interested in insects as I was, and asked me to come back after classes, to go over his volumes on insectology. An hour later I was back at my job, quite oblivious to the reprimands I got. Life had started opening a door again, a mere crack, but it was enough.

The next Sunday we learned from the pulpit that the new headmaster was starting a Christian Youth Society, for the mental and spiritual betterment of youths from eleven to seventeen. The idea sounded full of possibilities, especially since he also mentioned some sort of society library entirely for us youths, who hitherto

had been excluded from everything. Then when I was getting excited about all these new prospects, Father announced that we were going to America. So definitely that he even mentioned the city where we'd live: Grand Rapids, in the State of Michigan.

Suddenly nothing else mattered. After all these years of false hopes and disappointments, somehow the time had become ripe, internationally, nationally, locally, economically, personally. Suddenly, too, Father had decided that Wicrum and our position there was wholly impossible. Contradictorily, both he and Mother also insisted that they were taking this drastic step wholly for the sake of us boys, claiming that all the family difficulties had nothing whatsoever to do with their decision.

Mother would emphasize over and over again: "I can say with a clear conscience that we'll be among the very few families that move to America voluntarily, and that there is nothing dishonourable, sordid or even dubious behind our undertaking." This seemed to give her a great deal of consolation. Perhaps it also gave her courage, because she personally had always postponed the actual date of going, no doubt realizing all too well that migrating with a houseful of children, and starting a life anew, and penniless, in an alien land had nothing inviting about it.

Continually she made us realize that from now on we'd have to consider ourselves very poor, and helpless, and humble. "Because we don't want to be beholden to anyone, in any way."

None of us had any objection as long as the goal was America. Also we had no realization of what we were about to undertake. We really had nothing more than blind faith, and blinder hope, and just enough desperation to make us pretty oblivious to all possible disastrous results.

## CHAPTER XXI

### ATTEMPTS TO MAKE MEMORIES IMPORTANT

WE CHILDREN WERE immediately ready to do away with the old and to assume the new. Our going solved so many problems for us; it put a period behind much that was unsolvable, or simply substituted a newer question mark for an old one. Actually we hardly realized how much of an ordeal our parents were going through. Their anxiety was only mentioned formally

in the family prayers to God. When other adults arrived we were sent upstairs, even though I was told many a time that I was now old enough to carry some of the family's burdens.

Meanwhile we took advantage of the occasion to conjure up a sentimental nostalgia for the scenes we were soon to leave. We'd find little gables, dormers and ornaments on the old houses that we'd never noticed before, and now would try to fit them into the jigsaw puzzle of our memories. We took greater notice of the sea, now that we'd have to sail upon it for eight days or more, but only in afterthought did we concern ourselves with our own shore which we might never see again.

Naturally, in no time we had become the focus of all sorts of sentimental attention. Old fishwives would stop us and wring our hands and mumble to us about our being buried alive. Or they'd give us impossible tokens of esteem, unwieldy or perishable presents, and warn us against the furious pace of life in America, about which they knew less than we did. We accepted it all rather importantly.

Remembering patriotic and sentimental tales and lectures, we made solemn vows to each other and to our friends that we'd always be true to Holland, that our allegiance to Queen and country would never waver, and that certainly—in line with the sentiments expressed in a patriotic song—we'd return some day, and that our coffins would rest in the same hallowed ground upon which our cradles had stood. Sometimes that made me feel pretty tragic, especially during sermons, or when I stood alone on the green dike and listened to the monotonous roaring of the sea.

On the whole, however, I felt completely and excitingly liberated. There was no use now in keeping me in the workshop any longer. In America I'd start an entirely new and different career; and my weekly wages of twenty-five cents would add up to only a negligible amount by the time we got ready to leave. The best thing I could do, Mother decided, was to keep an eye on my younger brothers during all this uprooting, all this parting from friends and relatives. Furthermore, I was kept constantly busy carrying little potted plants, pieces of embroidery, copper figures, and china vases to this and that good neighbour or favourite friend, a performance which was primarily intended to rid the house of all such cumbersome items, but failed entirely in its purpose. The friends who received those keepsakes invariably had a keepsake for us in return, which of course they expected us to take with us to America. If we didn't, I gathered, all those friends would be mortally offended for ever. . . .

I envied my brother Rem. He was supposed to be at school,

and out of harm's way. But he argued that any further Dutch schooling at this critical period of his life would only be a waste of time; and certainly no teacher would be mean enough to report his final delinquencies to our parents. I vowed I wouldn't betray him, and so he wandered about unhampered. While I marched through town with little pots and pans, and returned with little pitchers and kettles, he had a fine time pursuing the new pickerel in the old canals, stabbing the dark flounders in the pellucid water under the piers, and exploring neighbouring towns to see what could be seen and who could be fought.

One dramatic incident occurred to me. While I was pushing my young brother Kornelis in his "sport-kar" (a sort of hybrid baby carriage and pushcart) down the road to Nes, for the special purpose of delivering some very choice plants to our Tante Grietje, we were unexpectedly overtaken by a red automobile. Only by jumping with Kornelis, carriage, plants and all into the canal-side reeds did I avert disaster; or so I fervently believed. During the next half-hour while I pushed my reclaimed load on toward Nes again, I was lost in melodramatic daydreams. Wouldn't it have been symbolic and tragic if right then and there that red auto had run over us and killed us? I kept imagining how the townfolk would have wagged their heads solemnly over our poor little corpses and exclaimed: "Of course they were never meant to die on American soil. It was tempting God, and now He has showed His almighty will. . . ."

But those daydreams didn't last long, nor did they leave any appreciable imprint on my mind. I soon was confronted with a much more tragic reality. I was ordered to get all my precious atlases and maps together and to distribute them among my friends. They were too bulky to carry with us, and naturally America would have vastly superior atlases, and certainly very soon we'd be rich enough over there so that I could buy new ones. I wasn't quite convinced; but my biggest problem was to think of anyone worthy to receive them. I even toyed with the idea of secreting some of my specially favourite maps and pages of statistics on my body, beneath my clothes. I had a vague notion that I'd be able to fool the Customs' officers as well as my parents. Furthermore, I seemed to believe that on the boat I'd be able to do my undressing in private, in spite of the fact that I'd already carefully examined a picture of the type of third-class stateroom we'd occupy on the boat, a mere cubicle, eight feet by ten, which would have to contain the entire family.

In the end I made my parents promise to let me keep a few of the lighter, paper-bound volumes. I achieved this by unwittingly

embarrassing my mother, mainly because I hadn't been informed of the fact that almost as soon as we reached America there'd be still another addition to the family. I simply kept pointing out that I considered it very impractical to pack so many beribboned, frilled, and knitted baby clothes, which certainly my youngest brother could never wear again, unless America was an even more fantastic place than I had heard.

The last two weeks our relatives came from near and far to admonish us, to weep over us, and to burden us with more presents. In the end they even persuaded my mother to sew her best feather bed into burlap sacking and to ship that to America, too. In America, they maintained, everything was flimsy and machine-made, and certainly the beds must be uncomfortable and apt to break.

We had so many uncles, aunts and cousins. From among the latter I had to choose somebody worthy to receive my atlases. I finally narrowed my choice down to my cousin Willem from the city of Groningen, who seemed rather more educated and civilized than the rest. He, however, almost managed to upset my weighty decision.

Rem and I were instructing him in the peculiar sorts of deviltry possible in our town, which to him, a city-grown lad, must have seemed somewhat quaint and esoteric. In any case, we got into an argument while supposedly we were attempting to taunt a rather calm-tempered bull into traditional bull-like fury. The argument was about the comparative beauty, size and importance of Grand Rapids in America (of which I was the champion) and of Groningen in our country, my cousin's home town. He claimed to have heard from a minister of the gospel, whose word therefore could not be doubted, that Grand Rapids in many respects was an inferior city: it had neither age, nor history, nor canals, nor harbours, nor even a central square with a cathedral, all of which Groningen proudly possessed. I put up a terrific argument, and was hurt by Willem's disloyalty to my future home town, although at that point I knew little more about that city than some 1910 population figures. These I had gleaned from the back of a gaudy picture post card showing a great mass of tinted spruces, and bearing the further information that the city boasted twenty parks. He finally tried to soothe my outraged feeling by adding that the minister had also stated that Grand Rapids was a veritable Jerusalem, studded with churches, all of the correct religion, all attended by good people of Dutch extraction. It was to no avail; I'd already decided not to give him my atlases after all, but to seal them up in a box which I'd throw into the sea

when the tide was going out. They might possibly drift to America.

Then we pursued the unwilling bull again, who in the end turned out to be nothing more dangerous than a corpulent steer.

We pestered an old woman living in a little old house because she was supposed to be a witch, and was known to smoke a clay pipe on occasions.

We pushed a forgotten wheelbarrow into the canal, and scratched our names deeply into the clay of a country lane for posterity's sake. We almost caught a stork, almost stoned a cuckoo, and really committed a dozen other minor acts of vandalism.

Our parents would be too busy with relatives and too distracted with plans to check up on us.

Tired and rather mud-smearsed we returned to town, and after we'd washed and brushed ourselves, we took our cousin to our final meeting of the Christian Youth Society. In spite of going to America, I had become a member of it and now after six meetings I was going to honour it with my presence for the last time.

We arrived late and interrupted the opening payer. Half an hour later, our city-bred cousin went into paroxysms of laughter—in which I as his host felt myself compelled to join—at the way one of our local youths was massacring the Dutch language. This youth was reciting a long rhymed piece about a minister in hiding from the Spanish Inquisition, who was kept alive by a chicken which daily laid an egg for him in a near-by straw pile. There was no way of stopping Cousin Willem's laughter, nor my echo of it, so that our new headmaster asked us kindly to leave the meeting. Not until we were outside, and had got some control over ourselves, did I recall that I was supposed to deliver my farewell speech at the meeting. My parents had insisted during the previous week that I write that speech, and here it was in my pocket, undelivered, and I was barred from the meeting.

My cousin and I tried to find some way out of this dilemma. He sat down and read my speech and declared that it was very worthy and important, and that certainly if I'd gone to all the trouble of composing it, it shouldn't be wasted. Finally, we decided to slip back into the church and slide my speech beneath the door of the consistory room in which the meeting was being held. On the outside I scribbled: "Kindly read in memory of David DeJong, if this is discovered." Hoping for the best, we then departed for the polders to find Rem, and some possible new mischief.

On the sea side of the dike we built a sort of vault from old



bricks and put in it mementoes of our life in Wierum, and then buried it deep before the new tide came in. We made a solemn vow that come what may, we three would gather on the spot ten years later and dig it up again. For good measure Rem put in a green crab—he insisted that crabs lived to be a hundred years old, and in case this one should die, its shell at least would last forever.

The tide was coming in. We hurried to the top of the dike, where suddenly I remembered a hideous flaxen-haired doll, a prize possession of my youngest brothers during their sieges of pneumonia. We had intended burning it at the stake, pretending that it was some historical Dutch martyr, but now I decided it had better go into the vault, too. By the time we'd found it, however, the tide was too high, so we burned it very dramatically on top of the dike, whereupon the dike warden chased us, because we were supposedly endangering the high, moist, earthen dike, which couldn't possibly catch fire. As a result, we had to hide in the kelp piles on the polder until dusk before we dared to approach town again. There in the kelp we made additional vows to remain loyal to the House of Orange-Nassau, and I promised to give my atlases to my cousin after all.

## CHAPTER XXII

### EXODUS

WHILE I AM WRITING these memoirs, I am approximately the same age both my parents were when they moved with us children to America. If I were to write this story from their viewpoint, I would have to force myself into a radically different frame of mind. I would at least try to understand in some measure their peculiar madness, or despair, or wholehearted or blind faith; or their courage, their ambition, their greatness or smallness, their ignorance or wisdom in taking so drastic a step. Both were in their late thirties, poor, utterly unacquainted with American life and customs. None of us knew one word of English. We had no relatives in Michigan to fall back upon in case of need. Also, there was no really pressing reason why my parents should ever have left Holland. Yet they went, with a whole flock of young children, and with my mother due to give birth to still another child soon after we reached America. But if I tried to write it that way, it wouldn't be my story. At least it wouldn't be the

story the way I want to present it, from my peculiar point of view. Furthermore, in all honesty, I can't put myself in my parents' place. Not now especially, when I've reached the same age they were when they took that terribly important step. I lack the abandon, or the daring, or the need (whether it was imagined or real, makes little difference) or the stubbornness of purpose. I simply cannot understand what ever made them do it.

If I were even to attempt to write their story, I would have to do it in the form of fiction. Here I'm almost wholly concerned with my own personal problems, problems often only partly realized and very faultily remembered. Perhaps I was just young enough at the time, so that the readjustments which I soon had to make could fit in easily with my natural development. Certainly I was reaching an age when of necessity I had to make myself more articulate, if not always more logical, about events affecting me. Everything the events and years had brought me was wound upon the skein of self, although it all was only partially and very faultily realized. Sometimes now, I felt the need of a little unwinding to help me understand what it was all about. My reactions no longer were direct, or simple, or immediate.

At twelve, I wanted to go to America, almost desperately. Yet, I loved Holland, and especially our old town. Now I've come to love America with a stronger love, respect and faith than I ever had for Holland. The old country has become largely a matter of somewhat nostalgic memories, sentimental attachments and perhaps just a few vague stirrings of conscious historical pride. Now that the United States stands first in my affection, at times almost fanatically so, I frequently feel called upon to defend my country of adoption against so-called native-born Americans. That, too, is only natural. Certainly the growth of this love is impossible to trace accurately. It took so many years, and it still goes on. But my readjustments, especially in the beginning, were often extremely painful. Too often I can only remember the pain. Then the memories of the pleasanter things that came before simply become more nostalgic. But they in no wise can act as substitutes for current love and faith or even for hurt or bafflement.

Because of all this, I'm trying to write about my remembered reactions only. And actually I don't remember much about those last few days in Holland, which logically should have left a more definite imprint on my mind. I simply recall saying good-bye to many weeping relatives and friends, burning a lot of worthless things behind the dike, allowing a treasured red ball to float out on the outgoing tide. I wanted to feel sad and sentimental, and

so looked expectantly up every old alley, courtyard and side canal for something to intensify my romantic feelings. I'd walk along the main canal and suddenly I'd feel the impact of parting and of loss coming nostalgically over the water, reflected in the sheen of it, rippling along the moored boats, floating upon the algid surface. I'd walk from vermilion dike fence to vermilion fence, gazing down upon the sun-drenched town, pushing stupid sheep aside, watching the weasels dart out of sight between the dike's huge basalt blocks. And I'd gaze rather challengingly at the old grey tower, as if to coax it into making me feel some very strong emotion that would persist in my memory for all my life. And then beyond the town I'd stare out over the green, blue, yellow, mauve, tan, heliotrope fields, trellised so accurately with sky-reflecting canals, studded with its thirty-odd towns all visible around their towers.

But that wasn't my prevalent mood. There was too much to be done; we were too much in demand. And everywhere the emotional fisherfolk tried to waylay us for further sentimental leave-takings—quite forgetting that only the previous summer they'd thrown stones at us and broken our windows. Now they pulled us into their houses to feed us morsels of fish, cups of tea, and, if our parents weren't looking, little drinks of gin or something equally potent.

The last evening we spent among hosts of lugubrious people. Fortunately we boys were sent to bed early, because we were starting out in the dead of night, even though there was a train which left the station at Hantum, only three miles away, at a much more convenient time next morning. However, our parents had decided that leaving during the day was tantamount to courting disaster. The whole town would be there to see us off and to hinder us with good intentions and sheer old-fashioned curiosity. So Father had hired a carriage which would take us all the way to Leeuwarden, from where we'd take a night train direct to Rotterdam.

I had fully intended staying awake, branding my emotions, as it were, upon my mind with wistful memories. I fell asleep the minute my head struck the pillow. By the time we had been awakened and a whole army of aunts, uncles and grandparents had supervised our getting into our best Sunday clothes, it was time to leave. It was two-thirty, and the carriage stood ready, amazingly enough, with a whole flock of townfolk around it in spite of the late hour. At that very moment the old tower seemed to bestir itself, clear its throat, and permit the old clock within it to bong out the lonely half-hour. More folk came up Carcass

Street bearing dried and smoked fish, figs, oranges, cookies and cakes, which they intended us to consume on our long and perilous journey.

Then somehow we were rolling out of town. My parents seemed stunned and tearful, but all my brothers were already fast asleep again. There were faint flickers of lightning along the horizon, but not any thunder yet. The horses clopped rhythmically over the last bridge, and I made a vow to myself that I was going to stay awake during the entire trip to Rotterdam, because now that we were leaving Holland, I'd at last get an opportunity to look with my own eyes upon all the regions I'd never seen except on my maps. Already I knew every town and village we were going to pass and the size and population of each, although there were more than a hundred of them. I had to stay awake.

I was actually in terror of falling asleep and missing something, because the night was still so utterly dark, and there was so little to distract me apart from Mother's occasional muffled sobs and Father's stern silence. I asked Father for permission to sit out in front with the driver, and was surprised that he gave it without a murmur of protest.

I took my seat beside the driver, of whom I stood in considerable awe. He was a rawboned, heavy-shouldered, noisy fellow, who perpetually smelled of horses and shouted to everybody as if they, too, were horses. He had very little to say to me at that dark hour, which was as it should be, because he was one of the town's almost heroic characters. He was the only really native townsman who actually stripped down to his skin once a summer and went swimming in the sea, a performance which was usually well heralded, and brought an audience of hundreds of shouting and crowding men and women to the dike.

There were by actual count three men in Wierum who could swim. But those went out in rowboats, undressed, donned bathing suits, and swam far out from shore. Then they'd return fully dressed again. For some reason the townfolk considered a bathing suit even more indecent than no clothes at all. Women would hide their faces when an occasional stranger came to bathe in our waters. The water was seldom warm enough for bathing, however, as we lived too far north.

Our driver was the one glaring exception in the town. On the hottest evening of the summer he would climb the dike steps with a considerable following. The men would crowd closest, but the women wouldn't be afar away, peering curiously, and the old folk would follow discreetly, shaking their heads over such folly, but unwilling to miss any part of the show. Just over the rim of

the dike, our driver would undress with the loudest and most raucous whoops and yelps I'd ever heard any man utter. Then with even more mighty bellowings he'd leap from the crowd, naked, pale as a dead fish, and with his enormous, red work hands covering his private parts as no mere figleaf could ever have done it, he'd plunge down the dike slope to the edge of the water.

We never learned if he could swim or not. The water was never quite deep enough where he went in, and he splashed and kicked so furiously that there seemed to be a constant vacuum about him anyway. After about ten minutes of such contortions, during which everybody, especially the women, crowded closer to the water's edge to see him emerge in the flesh, he would raise additional warning howls, and come plunging back toward the spectators, who naturally would cry shame and horror, but wouldn't budge a foot. Afterward, when fully dressed once more, he'd get himself nicely drunk to take away the "inner chill" the sea had given him.

This fabulous figure was going to be our final link with our old town. Cogitating about this phenomenon kept me awake, that and my terror of the approaching electric storm, which was still so far distant, however, that I could barely hear the thunder. I wanted dawn to come. I knew we were going through Blija, my birthplace, and I wanted to see it again. Unfortunately the black sky was merely turning somewhat purple in the east when we clattered through the dark little town, and I was disappointed. Only an hour later was it barely light enough to see the score of little "um" towns we went galloping through.

Almost too soon after that there came the bustle of newly awakened Leeuwarden, then the station, and suddenly also the storm, breaking in full fury. Finally, we were in the train, speeding toward Rotterdam, and there lay all the towns I had anticipated, speckled upon the clean green, scoured land. I was exalted; but also impatient with my brothers, who refused to stay awake, and with Mother who said flatly: "I can't look at it," and with Father who seemed so concerned with his own thoughts.

I was at last seeing the Netherlands. Once out of Friesland Province, we sped through a corner of Drenthe, across Overysel, Gelderland, Utrecht, and into Zuid Holland. I was no more capable of sleeping than a hawk who was watching a flock of chickens. The heaths and sandy hills of Gelderland threw me into ecstasies: I'd never before set eyes on such uneven land. Then came Rotterdam, by far the largest city I'd even been in. But by this time every one of us was terribly hungry, and precious hours were spent merely in getting to the boat, finding the little third-

class cubicle which was called "our stateroom," and then hungrily marching ashore again to find a restaurant Father remembered from his soldier days.

All this time we were seeing amazing sights, almost amazing enough to make us forget our hunger. Here in Rotterdam we saw our first real foreigners, Poles, Lithuanians, Hungarians, Russians; barefooted women dressed in gaudy shawls and skirts, and oddly garbed men. We were filled with excitement when we learned that these people were going to sail on the *Nieuw Amsterdam* with us. Still, the journey to the restaurant seemed endless. We had to cross so many wide bridges and we had to avert our eyes from so many interesting sights which surely would be so much more interesting if we could only see them with full stomachs.

Then Father suddenly said: "There it is," and pointed at nothing magnificent at all, but just an ordinary brick front building on the opposite side of a wide square. We had barely started across this square when, as if by a miracle, all the traffic suddenly disappeared from it, to the tune of some important-sounding martial music coming from up one street. If we hadn't been quite so hungry, we might have stopped to investigate this; or we would have tried to account for all the mounted police who suddenly appeared. But how were we to know that all this wasn't just the usual thing in so large a city as Rotterdam? Somehow all the people now gathering on the edges of the square seemed merely to have stopped to contemplate the scoured emptiness before them, or to watch the majestic equestrian police. The latter were now converging upon a flurried peddler with a handcart, who in vain was trying to escape them and yet to get across the square.

Rem and I were in the vanguard of our little group. There across the great empty square was our restaurant. Nothing could have stopped us now that breakfast was at last in sight. Together we plunged into the square, oblivious to the sudden loud burst of music, the bleating of trumpets, the thudding of drums, the tramp of soldiers' feet. And there, suddenly, both of us were engulfed in the finest and haughtiest parade that we'd ever set eyes on. We were completely swamped by it, and clinging to each other's hands, we simply held our ground and gazed wide-eyed at something golden in the way of a carriage which couldn't be anything but the royal state carriage itself. And lo, there ensconced in it was our own Queen, whom we'd never even hoped to lay our humble eyes on. And the Prince Consort, and two other personages, also definitely royal. Just when we were starting to realize that perhaps we had no business on those august premises, several

magnificently garbed guards swooped down upon us. They deposited me on one side of the square, and Rem on the other, with invectives and warnings which would have hurt my feelings more if I hadn't been quite so hungry and surprised.

Somehow the parade passed by and the family got together in one body again. In the restaurant we learned that we'd gazed upon royalty in the flesh, not only our own Queen and Prince Consort, but also the King and Queen of Denmark, who that very day had chosen to make a state call. We gathered that we had been the only unexpected part of the great spectacle. At the time we weren't even particularly impressed; so much was happening to us personally. And as Rem said: "Anyway, to-morrow she won't be our Queen any longer." That sounded rather irreverent, and Father reprimanded him casually for it, but nevertheless it was pretty much indicative of our feelings at the time. We expected the worst and the most and the utterly impossible and unusual: if all the potentates of Europe had come and joined us in our restaurant we wouldn't really have been surprised, perhaps merely somewhat chagrined because our meal would have been delayed.

Not until we'd been on the ocean several days did we come to look upon our intrusion into the Queen's own show with considerable awe and shame. Perhaps, Rem and I decided, it was just as well we were leaving the country for ever. Our names would certainly be marked down in some black book and our sin would be held against us till the day of our death. We felt somewhat reassured by the fact that we were halfway to America, until we recalled that no one had even asked our names at the time. . . . Still, the ways of monarchs were devious and dangerous.

On the evening of that day on which we'd beheld royalty and lived in spite of it, our boat slipped out of Rotterdam's harbour. I had intended to be on deck to shed real parting tears and to sing the national anthem in a choking voice. But we'd had such a time adjusting ourselves in our tiny stateroom, finding the proper toilets and bathrooms, getting unpacked and undressed in relays, and figuring out how the seven of us could fit into the six bunks, that we lay fast asleep when we should have been bidding farewell to Holland's receding shores. Our new life simply started with deep, oblivious sleep.

## PART TWO

*Dutchman, Dutchman, belly fulla straw,  
Can't say nothin' but, ja, ja, ja.*

### CHAPTER XXIII

#### EMIGRANTS

THE NEXT MORNING our new life began in all its complicated fullness, upsetting all our previous intentions and even most of our old emotions.

Rem, Meindert and I each had an upper bunk, and we soon discovered that by raising ourselves a little we could look over the partitions into the adjoining staterooms. Immediately we started exchanging bunks, so that each of us could look at the three different cabins in rotation. On one side especially were we bountifully rewarded. There in a cabin as small as our own were several screaming children and one rather disturbing woman. This woman had one peculiar eye which kept looking at us fixedly though unemotionally, while the other watched the squirming children. Pretty soon, when this latter eye beheld our faces above the partition, the mouth beneath it started scolding in violent Dutch, while the former eye retained its gleaming serenity and now looked elsewhere. We ducked, and when we looked again, we peered into an empty red socket, while the serene eye simply lay disembodied on a washstand. But the woman's Dutch became even more violent and ungodly, so we decided we'd better get dressed and go see what the day had to offer elsewhere.

After amazing complications, we finally got dressed and rushed up to the deck. And there I had my first glimpse of foreign soil, the French coast and Boulogne on one side, and on the other, the white cliffs of Dover, the first mountains I had ever beheld. Then it was time for breakfast, and the commandeering of a table safely out of reach of the shawled and bearded "Jews" became a prime necessity. We were told to find other congenial Hollanders,



but of course they had to be "of the faith" for our parents to approve of them. We found many of them, but I wasn't particularly impressed by them. The "Jews" seemed much more colourful and exciting.

Of course, by the second day out we'd learned that those Jews were largely Rumanians, Poles, Lithuanians, and other Central Europeans. That was obvious simply from the fact that they lay about on the deck wailing their Ave Marias, as no orthodox Jew could or would. But with their beards and shawls and bare feet these people had looked like Biblical characters as depicted in our illustrated Bibles, and I hated to be disillusioned. Still these foreigners didn't know how to use the toilets, and suddenly that became a matter of grave importance to us Hollanders.

This crisis led to the first formal discussions with the other congenial, clean and orderly Hollanders. A leader emerged from among them at once, a gangling God-fearing man, the father of eleven children. But first we all had to make sure that there wasn't a minister of the faith on board, before we handed over the leadership to a mere layman. "You won't find a minister in the third class," our steward reported scornfully. "In the second or first perhaps, but we can't allow the different classes to get mixed up with one another."

The tall, thin man had already proved his worth by praying at his table with his wife and eleven children. Now he had to prove his mettle in dealing with a much more earthly matter. By giving the steward a considerable tip, he managed to get one of the toilets and one of the baths especially reserved for us Hollanders, and these sanctuaries were now kept inviolate by means of a magnificent brass chain and a burnished padlock, to which he himself kept the key. Going to the toilet became somewhat of a class-conscious ritual. The "foreigners" didn't seem to resent it, however; they were impressed and amused, and some of the boldest of them attempted to climb over the partitions to see what secret rituals the Hollanders performed in their particular toilet. This of course brought about further difficulties. It was decided that two men should accompany each woman and stand guard outside the door.

By the time the toilet problem was settled, the European coast was irrevocably out of sight. We boys were urged to associate with the eleven children of our leader, but they immediately repudiated us: we were country bumpkins, we had no stamp collection nor herbariums as they had. Thereupon Rem and I started exploring the lower regions of the boat. We knew that in the bowels of the ship some sort of inferior human life could be

encountered. From it came strange smells, sounds, and rumours. We found the steerage passengers.

We weren't allowed down below there, but Rem in his wanderings had already made friends with a lower-class steward who passed out the buckets of soup to the steerage passengers, and who needed two helpers. Naturally we saw much, too much down there. There were hosts of hairy and inert people lolling everywhere, often in a state of considerable undress. We held the bucket while the steward ladled out some sort of watery mess. We clung close to him because we felt ill at ease down there. We looked shamefacedly at a large coarse female, with enormous breasts exposed, to which children perhaps as old as four would run and suckle for a while, and then run off and play again, as if they were mere animals. Others would huddle woefully together, and wail their Ave Marias mournfully, while they deloused each other.

In spite of our intentions to the contrary, we couldn't help telling our parents what we had seen; and we did it so graphically that they cut us short, telling us that such things shouldn't be spoken of by clean Christian tongues. We were ordered never to go down to the steerage again, were submitted to an examination for lice, and made to take a hot bath at once.

At the time Father was much occupied in hunting up a minister of our denomination who was supposed to be on board somewhere. That man certainly could be of great help in leading us into the Promised Land. For seven days in succession he never left off trying to get in touch with the good man, but he failed. The only contact we had with the privileged creatures of the second and first classes were the oranges, pennies and bonbons they threw down to us beggars below. Perhaps, we suggested, the man of the cloth was among these. But Father vehemently declared that this was impossible, and forbade us to pick up anything thrown down to us.

On our third day out, the ship's health officer managed to curtail our activities considerably. On that day, the sea was uncommonly rough, so that more than two-thirds of the passengers were seasick. By noon, ours was the only intact family in third class to come down to dinner. Our father proudly pointed out to the stewards and other menials what great sailors we all were, and so it happened that the doctor pounced on us as being sufficiently hardy to stand some of the cruder forms of examination and vaccination at once. Even those failed to subdue us for many hours, but they did make our excursions to the steerage (now of course made very secretly) seem pretty unpalatable. We

tried to confine ourselves to our own part of the ship, and because we were rather swollen and feverish from our inoculations, this was sufficient.

Occasionally, Mother would forgo a meal, but this was due to her interesting condition, we learned, and had nothing to do with seasickness. The "condition," I gathered had been brought about by her parting from her dear ones and her old belongings. That she wasn't actually seasick, I could tell from the way she travelled from cabin to cabin, administering unto all the sick Hollanders, chiefly by making them eat the dried and smoked flounders the Wierumers had pressed upon us. They worked miracles, so that all through the trip Mother was in great demand if she carried the fish with her.

The storm continued for three days, but we all remained amazingly healthy and hungry throughout it. As a substitute for the steerage, we discovered the foredeck, where the Ave Marias were even more clamorous and frequent. Here we joined in with the foreigners, and sang and chanted the Ave Marias, perhaps not as devoutly as they, but certainly as loudly. Safely away from Father's censorious eyes, we also participated there in the undecorous scramble for tossed-down coins and fruit.

Earlier on the journey, a young Dutch bachelor had attached himself to our parents. He had been lonesome, and he was a solemn, steady, religious sort of man. Now, however, to show his gratitude, he insisted on escorting us boys around. Holding our hands, he'd pace around the deck with us, warning us against lice and all the "sly" foreigners. In spite of his good intentions, he was naturally in our way. Especially since on the second day I'd discovered a beautiful Hungarian piano-player, of whom he strongly disapproved the moment he set eyes on her. We gathered that the things he found wrong with the Hungarian could be enumerated under three headings. One, he had a nice wholesome girl back in Holland whom he'd marry some day. Two, the Hungarian wasn't a Hollander, hence liable to be of the wrong faith. Three, she was adept at playing the piano, which unlike the organ was a worldly instrument, attuned to the worship of Satan. Of course, she was also pretty, and had cascades of gleaming dark hair and luminous brown eyes, and she loved to play with me and Rem.

Though we couldn't understand each other's language, we managed to communicate with each other very successfully. She sang and played weird, mournful, dizzy and very un-Dutch tunes, with such effect that we insisted that she eat at our table. This, in spite of the bachelor's warnings, our parents allowed. And then when at the first indication of the family prayers, she also lowered

her head and folded her hands and closed her eyes, she was accepted. "We never know but that we may be harbouring one of God's own," Mother said, and then she added something about God being able to see beyond outward appearances. Which puzzled me, as I couldn't see any need of looking beyond our Hungarian's beautiful outward appearance.

Then we received a few more inoculations, and had brief spells of fevers, and even brief spells when our stomachs rebelled at the smell of food, but these periods seldom lasted longer than one or two hours. We couldn't be kept in our stateroom, especially since all our neighbours were very audibly seasick. However, one day we were rewarded with some excitement when the woman next door lost her glass eye and it was discovered an hour later right in our stateroom, having rolled between our baggage. We had a fine time searching for that famous eye, and when we found it, the woman volubly forgave us for peering over the partition at her, especially when we explained that only in that manner had we been able to discover she had a glass eye at all, and so had been all the more efficient in recovering the valuable object. She wasn't of our faith, however, Mother said: she said she wouldn't be surprised in the least if the woman was a downright Roman Catholic.

On this the fourth day out, we had already discovered that of the eighteen or so Dutch families in our class, all but perhaps one had fairly "unsavoury reasons" for leaving Holland. We seemed to be the exception besides one pious widow, who confided in Mother, as one pious woman to another, about all the "interesting conditions" and "insalubrious dilemmas" the other Dutch emigrants were in. Even our leader was held suspect now, or if not he himself, several of his eleven children. By the law of averages there must be at least two black sheep in such a number, and one was never to forget that they'd been brought up in Rotterdam, which after Paris, Hamburg, and Marseilles, was the fourth most wicked city in all the world.

Later the storm cleared up, and our vaccinations got better. Then we sang louder and better Ave Marias than ever with all the Poles and Lithuanians, or tried to trap the brown rats which we found scuttling up the pipes or tagged after the beautiful piano-player, who had now taught us twenty Hungarian words. Meanwhile we were subjected to more violent lice combings and massages with carbolic acid, since we simply could no longer keep ourselves segregated from the unwholesome "foreigners." We had not yet learned that we were foreigners, too, a realization that would come to us with a shock when we arrived in New York.

During the next few days we witnessed a burial at sea, saw a fight among the Poles, were vaccinated seven more times, helped our neighbour hunt for her glass eye once more, and were at last told that the Hungarian wasn't a fit companion for us. As a result, the Dutch bachelor's star was suddenly in the ascendant again.

And then, suddenly, in spite of the fact that we had anticipated it for days, there was America, the Statue of Liberty and New York's wonderful towers. How could it be, I wondered, that after having been so impatient to get there, I suddenly seemed almost frightened by America now that we had arrived? Was it because our uncertain future was only now becoming concrete and inescapable, and that uncertainty had to become part and parcel of me like any previous actuality? All at once I felt assailed by doubt. Previously when I had read doubt upon my parents' faces and heard it in the overtones of their everyday conversations, I had accepted it as a peculiar adult reaction, one induced by too many workaday cares.

I looked away from New York and back at my parents, then at all our fellow emigrants. Now that the towers of New York were within reach, we all seemed to have had uniforms of strangeness pressed upon us, uniforms which would make us like enemies invading a blandly oblivious country where no one cared anything about us. I felt this clearly in spite of the little bunting-draped boat which suddenly approached us with a tootling band, fluttering American flags and enormously lettered welcome signs. We had left home behind; we were not approaching a new home, only an indefinite spot somewhere in an unknown vacuum.

I realized then that we were only intruders. Perhaps this is what the others felt too, these companions of ours who were now waving handkerchiefs lackadaisically at the officiously excited occupants of the "Welcome" boat. And as intruders we were without honour or favour, even without any foothold in this foreign land. Unlike Americans returning to their own country, we weren't filled with delight at the sight of New York, nor with pride nor with happy anticipation. We didn't even have a right to any sentimental feelings about America; we first had to prove ourselves worthy of this country of our adoption. Now even all our early hopes and ambitions seemed to have fled from us. Suddenly too many heavy burdens and painful adjustments loomed like awful ogres over us, obliterating all our previous dreams. And even if our early hopes had lasted for a few hours, the miseries of Ellis Island would have wiped them out efficiently. There on Ellis Island all the world's worst indignities seemed to become our personal portion.

We were shunted here and there, handled and mishandled, kicked about and torn apart, in a way that no farmer would allow his cattle to be treated. "From here on," Father predicted with some strange foresight, "we are no longer men created in the image of God, but less than dumb beasts." He had made one desperate final attempt to find that Dutch preacher in second class. But here on Ellis Island we weren't even allowed to gaze upon those privileged creatures who had travelled in the higher classes.

Then suddenly Mother was taken away from us. Because of "her condition," Father told us. We, lashed to our individual baggage, were ordered to stay exactly where we were, while in turn Father was whisked away. No one about us seemed to be able to talk Dutch; besides, they couldn't help us, anyway, the plight of all us emigrants was the same. Two men in white jackets took hold of me, stripped off my clothes, punched, prodded, shook and practically disembowelled me. Then after I had been mauled, turned inside out and overhauled by ten more men in ten more cages and cubicles, I was thrust once more upon the maelstrom of bewildered people of all nationalities. While I was vainly searching for my luggage and my brothers, I was pounced upon by one of the eleven children of our leader on the boat, a girl of about sixteen. She fell upon my neck and sobbed out in anguished Rotterdam Dutch: "They've given Father a cross. A cross on his back. What will we do—Mother and the eleven of us children? Do go and find your father and mother, quick. . . ." Then seizing my hand, she led me to a tall wire cage like a bear cage at a zoo, and sure enough, there was her father, frankly weeping in the midst of a small group of other dismal-looking men. "Look at the cross on his back," the girl sobbed, and there all the way across the back of his blue coat was a chalked cross. . . .

At that very moment, however, I discovered my mother in an equally ignominious cage with several other bewildered women. She, too, had a chalked cross on her back. When we saw each other and the bars between us, we both started sobbing unashamedly. Then she said firmly: "It'll turn out all right. Tell the others where I am. Your father will come through all right; it is just that I . . ." Then she stopped, and somehow I gathered that she had almost referred to her "condition." Then she said miserably: "We should have gone second class. Those people didn't have to suffer these indignities. Here I'm caged up with harlots and idiots, just because . . ." but then her eyes began to snap and her voice got sharp. "... But what have you done with your brothers?

Where are they? You go back to them at once. Perhaps I'll never see them again. I've heard . . . Oh why can't I talk one word of English?"

I didn't have the heart to tell her that I'd lost the others. But then somehow, during the next hours of confusion, I found them again, and lost and found Rem seven more times after that. Finally, after nearly ten hours, we were somehow reunited with Mother, and we found ourselves in another small crowded boat, going to some other island. Once more we caught a glimpse of New York's famous skyline, but this time it only made us feel the direst misgivings. We were desperately hungry, and battered, and defeated.

Next we were going through the Customs, where a disagreeable inspector slashed my mother's feather bed to tatters, and groped around in it with both arms up to his elbows trying to discover anything that we might have secreted there. Mother sat there crying, while the feathers drifted around her, and Father stood beside her, white around the lips and temples, but unable to do a thing. Then the man tore all our other belongings apart, suspiciously scattering everything, even though Father had already indignantly pointed at the third-class labels to show that we couldn't very well have any wordly possessions worth bothering about.

Somehow all those things had to be put together again, and the more hopelessly damaged pieces left behind. We were only dumb foreigners now. Then that too, like one of the Biblical plagues, had come and been and passed by. By this time we hardly cared where we were being pushed to next or why. We simply filed through more gates and turnstiles, and finally came to a dead end where there was no possibility of going any further. There we sat down on our remaining luggage and waited with thousands of others, the very same "foreigners" we'd seen on the boat and felt so superior to.

It was now night, we saw from a slight rectangle of dark sky beyond a corrugated roof. Father was trying to find something to eat, something more wholesome than the popcorn and soft drinks which were the only sustenance in evidence. Then suddenly, a few more official-looking men herded us into the sooty waiting-room of a railroad station, which we gathered was underground, and somehow we found ourselves in a train. Then the train started moving, no doubt in the right direction, because Father had displayed our tickets with Grand Rapids marked plainly upon them. We'd arrive in Grand Rapids in another thirty-six hours, we gathered. And only then did we inspect the

canton of food which Father had bought for an American dollar. Even if it had contained nothing but raw potatoes, we would have eaten them.

What it actually contained was one large round crusty loaf of bread, which took up approximately eighty per cent of the space. No butter or cheese. Two overripe bananas, two apples, something that smelt like sausage, a tin of sardines without a key and a half dozen flat crackers. That was all. But suddenly we were no longer proper, polite, clean Hollanders. We were ravenous with hunger. All day we'd been treated like swine. Our disappointment at the box's contents only made us more desperate. We ate everything on the spot, oblivious to the stares of our equally woe-begone fellow travellers, and also oblivious to New York, which was receding into the darkness and which we might never see again. We never did want to see it again. Then, still hungry and still miserable, we fell asleep.

I woke up at dawn, rested. I saw fabulous America, all the unbelievable things I'd heard about: mountains, wide rivers, tall buildings, hundreds of automobiles, Negroes, and so few towns, and so little flat land, and no canals. The horrors of yesterday were behind us for ever, and the sun shone upon an endless and bountiful land. Now I was almost too excited to eat, even though Father had miraculously managed to buy some more food on the train.

Mother, in typical feminine fashion, had already discovered a sympathetic Dutch woman in the ladies' room. She, too, was going to Grand Rapids. She was in mourning, however, for a lost child, and kept bursting forth in paroxysms of grief. She oppressed us boys terribly, so that we found seats at the other end of the coach, where we could behave ourselves pretty much as we pleased.

Unexpectedly that night we arrived at a tiny junction, and were ushered off the train. It seemed we had to wait there till eight o'clock the next morning to make connections with another train. The surly stationmaster simply shrugged at the sight of us foreigners, took his lantern and marched off home. We tried to stretch out on the three wooden benches in the waiting-room to get some sleep, but they were too uncomfortable, and it was altogether too cold. Dawn came, showing a distant church steeple and two roofs. With the dawn arrived four Americans, obviously country people, who sat down to watch us foreigners, and burst into uncontrollable giggles at everything we said and did, meanwhile spitting with great dexterity into a smelly cuspidor many yards away.



The stationmaster returned, scowled at us, and made deprecating comments about us to the Americans. But of course he spoke in English, so we couldn't understand his actual words. The Americans giggled again, and all aimed simultaneously at the cuspidor, and then the train roared in, and we settled ourselves upon its wooden benches. We were now in Michigan and stared intently out the windows at this state which would be "ours" from now on. Soon the mournful woman announced that we were approaching Grand Rapids.

"But," Mother protested, "are you sure? Look at this country, it is full of heaps and hills and wildernesses. Nowhere a flat piece of ground. . . ."

Mother had expected a replica of Holland, canals, flat meadows and among them a neat red-roofed town. The mourning woman barely managed to say: "But it is Grand Rapids, nevertheless," before she burst into tears again because now she'd be meeting relatives at the station. And there suddenly, from behind a hill appeared Grand Rapids, and it didn't seem to be full of parks and trim spruces, as I'd been led by my post card to believe. It was composed of jumbled buildings, becoming more jumbled, grouping themselves more formidably, but it seemed also more haphazardly as the train went on: large factories, smoking chimneys, flimsy houses, a few trees. That was all I saw from the train. But I was in no mood to be disillusioned. This somehow would yet turn out to be one of those marvellously golden and towered American cities.

"Now," Mother warned us, "look your best and remember your manners, because soon we'll be meeting the gentleman who'll conduct us to our first house in America. Shake hands with him, but don't act either too forward or too shy. We know nothing about him, but he must be a man of some means and importance. Remember, first impressions are very important."

She put us through the usual inspection, but even we ourselves felt a bit dubious about our sooty hands, the gritty feeling beneath our eyelids, our dusty shoes and unruly hair. Were we really in proper shape to be accepted by America, even by this Hollander who had become an American?

## CAN'T SAY NOTHIN'

WHEN OUR HOST PRESENTED himself in the station, we were disappointed. Here was no "mijnheer" by any means, nor yet was he anything resembling an American; he was just a sort of composite of our fellow passengers on the train. This man didn't seem part of a great American city. He was simply another one of our dreams gone wrong.

He shook hands gravely with our parents, mentioned the Lord, the wealth of America, the tests to which one's faith was put, and the duty of a Christian toward a fellow member of that faith. He didn't seem to notice us boys, who stood at attention, ready to shake hands with him. Then at last, after he shifted his wad of tobacco to the other cheek, he took casual cognizance of us, and told Father that it was fortunate we were boys, because boys could make money quickly in America, and only boys "paid" to have around. We learned from him, too, that, except for one's faith, money was the only thing that talked in America. It evidently talked louder than one's faith, or manners, or education.

We all boarded a street-car, an electric tram, we realized with a feeling of pride in Grand Rapids for possessing such a thing. However, we didn't see much of the city, because the street-car was very crowded. Finally, we all piled out into what looked to us like a village, because there were so many trees, and the houses, instead of forming solid blocks, stood in separate little plots of grass. Moreover, they were all of wood, like summer cottages, instead of brick. But it was Grand Rapids, nevertheless, and soon we arrived at the house of our host, which actually had a veranda. Verandas impressed us tremendously; they were things that only villas had, hence symbols of wealth and leisure.

Dinner was waiting for us. But around the table sat a great many grown men, most of them in work clothes. We were considerably confused by this set-up. It was no wonder that we mistook the kindly, smiling little woman who bustled in and out of the kitchen for an elderly servant in a household composed entirely of men. This then must be an efficient American family, all men, who "paid" so much better than women to have around.

Gradually we learned that those men were boarders, and that the sweet little woman was our hostess, and that we mustn't wait for Father to serve us if we wanted to get anything to eat at all. We also learned that we were supposed to make conversation at the dinner table without waiting till we were addressed. Because we didn't do this, we were immediately characterized as shy; and shyness, we learned, was one of the cardinal sins in America. After dinner I tiptoed reverently to the veranda, and gazed upon the rocking chairs there, which somehow I imagined were intended for invalids. The wooden houses, with their oversized verandas and all their surrounding greenery, did look like a series of small sanitariums. Next I tried to decipher the meaning of an enormous billboard across the street: LILY WHITE FLOUR THE FLOUR THE BEST COOKS USE. I memorized the words, pronouncing them in Dutch phonetics, of course, and planned to build up my knowledge of English with them as a basis, though I didn't know yet what they meant.

Then we all started out for our own house, our first house in America, which was situated in a Christian neighbourhood composed entirely of Hollanders, all of the same faith we were. It would cost us merely eight dollars a month to live in so-sanctified a place, which turned out to be an alley, and seemed hardly worthy of glamorous America. On one side of the alley, along its entire length, was a greenhouse with barns, stables and seed-beds. On the other side stood a row of ugly little houses, and from their narrow little windows our fellow Christians peered out at us, then ducked out of sight again. The street was too narrow for sidewalks, and was extremely hot in the glittering sun. Still, we were willing to accept it in good faith, especially since it bore the good Dutch name of Freyling Place.

Our house was the next to the last one, and fortunately faced the open spaces of the greenhouse garden. And though it was made of wood and flimsy looking and in need of paint, it boasted a minute back porch, a smelly heaven tree in the back yard, and a cluster of lilac. In front, one concrete step led directly into our "parlour," which was empty of furniture, as was the rest of the little house, apart from an old table, six kitchen chairs, a two-burner gas plate in the kitchen, and two rather flimsy beds with stained mattresses. "Certainly," Mother remarked "we couldn't start up from much less."

"In America one starts with his own bare hands and ends up with millions," our host said loftily.

The little hostess pressed Mother's hand and murmured: "I'll do all I can to make things easier for you," in such a way that

we realized all her kindness would have to be done on the sly as if they were a sin.

Then we were left to our own devices, baffled, exhausted and sceptical. Still, we were determined to see the bright side of everything first, and praised the chairs because they seemed actually solid, the gas jets because they flickered with such a yellow tooth-like flame, the beds because they didn't seem to have vermin in them. Then we immediately decided that the youngest boys would have to sleep in the packing boxes after we'd unpacked our belongings.

But then we discovered the cellar, which smelled like a charnel house and had stagnant pools of water in it. Next we found the attic (the house had no second story) where the temperature was approximately 180 degrees. To our astonishment, this was dominated by a photograph about the size of a tabletop, depicting an obviously pious and rather moist-looking man. We decided he must be our landlord, and that it must be a quaint American custom to hang so large and so expensive a portrait of one's landlord in such a miserable place as this attic. It wasn't till some time later that the mystery of the picture was cleared up.

In the meanwhile Mother had decided to make a cup of tea to bolster up our spirits. Simultaneously, we discovered that there wasn't a toilet anywhere in the house, nor even a water tap. Already the gas had been a great disappointment to us: we'd been used to electricity in Holland. But the lack of water stunned us, could it be that that rusty little pump in a far corner of the yard was intended for human use? We tried it, and it poured forth some brownish gummy liquid that foamed like ale, but smelled like sewage. It was at that point Mother sat down and wept.

Rem came running in, announcing that he'd found the toilet, which consisted of a little house all by itself beneath the heaven tree. He said it had only two holes, but that the neighbour's flanking it had three, which didn't seem exactly fair to him. Furthermore, he'd seen three of the neighbours use it simultaneously without the slightest shame. We all flocked out to look at this unexpected adjunct to our house, and found it full of cobwebs and spiders, noisome smells, old newspapers and a volume which we later learned was the inevitable Sears Roebuck catalogue. But suddenly along the back fence a row of kids appeared and began yelling at us in all too understandable Dutch that Mother had a baby in her belly, and shouting at Father that he'd better lay off sleeping with her. We children were herded into the house at once, where Father declared: "Those, of course, couldn't have been the children of our Christian neighbours, even though they

did speak Dutch. Perhaps this sort of thing is to be expected in any big city."

To console Mother, he started out to get acquainted with the Christian neighbours, and to borrow a pail of water with which to make the tea. But all the neighbours he approached held their Christian charity in abeyance, as if they suspected that the small portions they possessed might be exhausted by evening. Even when they had water taps plainly visible in their houses, they announced to Father that they hadn't asked us to become their neighbours, and that we'd better use the water from our own cistern, seeing we'd rented the house. If that wasn't good enough, perhaps the greenhouse could furnish us with the water we needed. There was a tap in one of the stables.

So Father trudged all the length of our Christian street, while all the good neighbours ducked behind their curtains, and finally got a pail of water from the greenhouse stable. "Perhaps we'll have to get used to American ways," he tried to explain to us mildly when he returned.

We soon did. We were outcasts. Our neighbours pulled their kids away from us as if we were contaminated. They only approached us when they had an old useless hunk of furniture to dispose of at an exorbitant price, or when they wanted to pry into our personal affairs to learn exactly why we had to come to America and to their noble little street to disgrace them. One family was an exception. Mild-mannered and soft-spoken, they soon invited us to come to their house and use all the water we wanted. They lived five houses away, but it was better than going the entire length of the street. Somewhat to our astonishment, we children learned that they, too, belonged to our Church. And yet they seemed in their right minds. They even encouraged their children to associate with us. One of their boys came over immediately and instructed me in the English words for potatoes, strawberries, and other edibles, which he claimed to be of prime importance if you had to eat and live in the American way. They had the comical name of Worst, but to us they seemed worthy of sainthood any day.

For the rest, we suffered and were persecuted from the first day on, without giving any conscious offence to anyone. Whenever we stirred outdoors we heard the taunting singsong ditty shouted at us:

*Dutchman, Dutchman, belly fulla straw,  
Can't say nothin' but, ja, ja, ja. . .*

This was usually accompanied with scratching gestures to indicate that we had head lice. Soon enough we learned what we

could expect and behaved ourselves accordingly. Of course, there was no one to explain to us that these people were not real Americans, but merely Dutchmen who had arrived a few years, or at the most two generations, earlier from Holland. That country they invariably referred to as a manure pile, crawling with vermin, stagnating with poverty. However, these scornful remarks were no doubt made to cover up their own infamous pasts. To them we served as the perfect dupes on whom to palm off their warped cabinets, ring-stained tables, soiled pants and threadbare rugs.

We boys found one more exception to them in a sturdy fellow a little older than I, who lived in the next block. He went out of his way to champion our cause, and frequently fought the battles in which we'd have been defeated because we didn't know how to fight with fists, only with wooden shoes. He would escort us protectively down-town, holding our hands. That he should have grown up to die as an alcoholic, simply reflects on the inherent nobility of his character, though perhaps very obliquely. So many of the others have become such damnably respectable, pious, sedate creatures, that I choose to see a certain significance in his fate.

Naturally, it was much harder for our parents to adjust themselves than it was for us. We did so precariously, but often with much excitement. As early as the third day we decided to explore the city, if only we could get safely out of our own hostile neighbourhood. On this expedition we learned that what we'd thought to be a series of villages of wooden houses was actually the city of Grand Rapids. We appreciated the spaciousness, the greenness, the whizzing automobiles and street-cars, but something was definitely missing. We wanted tall brick buildings, and somewhere we knew there must be a river, and in that river there must be ships, and flanking that river must be dikes.

We three oldest boys started out in search of the dikes of that river. But the hot American summer weather soon exhausted us. Besides we were fooled so many times. Each time we spied a high grass bank down a side street, we'd go dashing toward it, only to find houses and gardens topping it, and then still more houses. Patiently we'd retrace our steps to Wealthy Street again, the only street we were sure of as a way of getting home again. And there on that street we saw our first live squirrel, and encountered our first flesh-and-blood Negro. We found him positively beautiful and glamorous. This marvellous creature opened his lips and said to us in a wonderful voice: "Well, well, how dy'e-do, boys." Reverently we repeated the words after him, accepting them as

Negro language, which henceforth we'd have to use to greet all Negroes. Already we'd learned that "Hallo" was the orthodox white American greeting.

Considerably edified, proudly repeating the "how dy'e-do, boys" to ourselves, we continued our search for the river, waving back at the Negro till he was out of sight. As we came closer to the heart of the city, many other things astonished us. For instance, there were those signs in the windows of houses proclaiming that the inhabitants were either Roman Catholics, or had gone on a vacation, or had a toilet. It seemed odd to advertise such private matters. Rooms to us was simply a variation of the Dutch *roomsch*, meaning "Roman Catholic." VACANCY was our own Dutch word meaning vacation, and certainly TO LET was an American form of the word toilet which we were already acquainted with. It must surely mean that these houses boasted of inside toilets.

What amazed us even more, however, was that no one in this part of town treated us as if we were monstrosities, not even the children. If they noticed us at all, it was without personal rancour or insults. Of course, we hadn't learned yet that these people were real Americans. But now we saw the river. And the river simply flowed along, without any dikes to hold it, without any ships or boats upon it. It was wide enough, but it simply rippled ingloriously over partly submerged rocks, pots and pans, old sleds and baby carriages, tin cans and buckets.

In some respects this was our most bitter disappointment, even though we soon discovered an enormous sewer pipe opening into the river. It was a comparatively dry pipe, fairly skittering with large brown rats. Then suddenly finding ourselves hungry, we retraced our way to Freyling Place, which we knew we could barely reach by nightfall. We three were vastly astounded when a big policeman bellowed an incomprehensible tirade at us, simply because we urinated against a tree, after we'd looked in vain for the familiar European street urinal. We gravely decided that people didn't do such things in America, though horses and dogs did.

A few days after that, we learned that we wouldn't be able to start school till September. We were going to a Christian school, one attended by most of the vicious kids in our street. That puzzled us, and Father told us that only God could explain such things. Still, we were deeply grateful that we wouldn't have to start attending school with these children for some months to come. At about this same time, some very distant cousins discovered us, and came to offer Father the loan of two hundred

dollars, at a very steep rate of interest. This again was American, we learned, even though somewhat beyond the pale of Christian fellowship.

A little later our landlord presented himself. He wore work clothes covered with cement, and his face and hands were gnarled. He wasn't the man at all whose enormous portrait hung in our attic. But he did explain that portrait. It was of a minister of the gospel who had died last year. He had been a good man, but he was chiefly important because he had died so young. The former occupants of our house had been so impressed by the good man's early demise that they'd bought the expensive photograph of him, as had many other brethren of the faith. But their grief and reverential memories had been very short-lived—in typical American fashion, the landlord inferred, though of course the minister and the former tenants had been Dutch—so they had simply left the photograph hanging in the attic when they moved from the house.

America was full of opportunities, we know, even though Father couldn't find any work. But the greenhouse man asked me to dig up dandelions out of the little park across the street, for which he offered to pay me fifty cents a day. I accepted readily, and so became the first American wage-earner in our family. I worked unflaggingly, to prove that I was worthy of my wage. The neighbourhood boys would line themselves along the wire fence of the park yelling tauntingly. "Does your father still sleep with your mother?" and sing-songing that ceaseless:

*Dutchman, Dutchman, belly fulla straw,  
Can't say nothin' but: ja, ja, ja.*

They pelted me with stones and rotten fruit. But I worked on without answering them or even looking up.

America was full of grasshoppers, sand and sandburs, mosquitoes that could draw blood, and houses with player pianos, women with high-heeled shoes, great heat and lovely flowers. It had dogs and squirrels who minded their own business, and kids who seemed to find unfailing sport in taunting us in their purposely ugly-sounding Dutch: "Daveed, Daveed, how come you to stink so? How come you're full of lice? How come you're so dumb, so foul, so sour, you stinking Dutchman?"

Rem quickly learned to fight with his fists. Soon, he said he would be more than my champion again, as he had been in Holland. Already the kids were starting to be afraid of him. Still, every day we were reminded foully, violently, dirtily, hideously, grossly, repeatedly, that Mother was about to have a baby. And



we'd see the kids' parents snickering at their taunts in their back yards.

Soon now I would be thirteen. Soon I'd be what? Old and wise enough so that I could forgive them? Or old enough so I could push my anger and hurt even deeper, farther out of sight? But it would still be there, bottled up dangerously inside me, and some day I'd prove to them . . .

From then on, steadily, unflaggingly, almost unconsciously, I started to hate those self-righteous Grand Rapids Dutch. Afterwards, for many years I fought against my hatred, because it was a sin. Or I would smugly tell myself that they weren't worthy of any conscious hatred. I should be able to understand it and reason it away. But it kept smouldering, and the more I came to love America and Americans, the more did I come to resent the Grand Rapids American-Dutch, whom ironically enough I accepted as typical Americans for several years until time and experience fortunately opened my eyes, but not quite to the point of forgiveness.

## CHAPTER XXV

### LEARNING AMERICA

I WAS DETERMINED TO SEE the true and the beautiful and the great, which in my opinion were inherent in America. But those things would have to be found at a distance; certainly never in our mean little street with its sour faces, fishy eyes and sneering mouths confronting one from all the raw little houses.

It didn't take us boys many days to learn that those peaceful hours of morning and afternoon during which we weren't molested were the school hours, when our enemies were safely incarcerated with their teachers and their schoolbooks. During those hours, then, we could safely explore the city. Before long, we also discovered the country, both a paradise and wilderness, which, in our opinion, really should be flat and cultivated to be worthy of its name. Instead, we found ourselves in a tumbling, curving, rolling conglomeration of trees, shrubs, weeds, zigzagging paths, wandering creeks and dizzy slopes. There certainly was nothing neatly planned and geometric about this, as we knew it would have been in Holland.

We were entranced, and also rather intimidated. We really expected Indians to come pouncing upon us, snakes to slither

down from the trees, exotic flowers to overwhelm us with deadly perfumes; we hardly dared to touch, let alone eat, any wild berry that we came upon. Never had any of us set foot in anything so wasteful, confused and wanton. This couldn't belong to industrious man, nor yet to the jealous God who had bidden man to cultivate the earth. Therefore it must be the particular realm of the evil one.

Still nothing untoward happened to us. At first, and largely because I had assimilated my reading about the jungles of the Amazon too well, we managed to discover heaps of snake eggs, gaping alligators, eagles larger than men, and flaming fire birds. We also saw, and without the assistance of our lurid imaginations, a tawny animal which for reasons all our own we called Old-Father, and which later turned out to be a humble woodchuck. Our Dutch backgrounds made Nature in America seem supercolossal in all its manifestations, and our trepidation surely helped to make our observations semi-accurate, although perhaps quite surrealistic.

One rather humdrum country road entranced us specially. We promptly christened it "The Hollow Way," because it dipped steeply toward a murmurous creek, careened along a slope, tunnelled beneath some dense, low-hanging trees, and then nonchalantly came to nothing in an abandoned gravel pit.

But those early beautiful days were few. We soon had to take any work we could get, frequently for as little as a dollar a week, to keep ourselves fed. After several weeks of trying, Father at last got a job as a carpenter for twenty-five cents an hour. That was all they could pay him, his new bosses pointed out, until he had learned efficient American methods of carpentry which far surpassed the outmoded Dutch ways. Also, they advised him to start overcoming his own notions of Dutch industry, artistry and thoroughness. They had no place in the more lucrative American set-up.

Twenty-five cents an hour, and to be treated like any gangling apprentice! Even that young I could well imagine what pride Father had to swallow, what resignation he had to put on as armour. Still, his new bosses were Christian Dutchmen, and he seemed to find great consolation in that.

Soon came our first Fourth of July celebration. We participated in it by staying close to the house and watching others explode firecrackers, which we knew we could never afford. Then, to our amazement, the man who had helped us to get established in America came to escort us to the city's largest park, a place we'd heard about, but which we'd decided was beyond our means and

station in life. Now Father and we three oldest boys were actually going to be conducted to John Ball Park. We could barely afford the four double street-car fares, but on the other hand, our parents argued, we could ill afford to offend our host.

The park was marvellous beyond all expectations, and so large and diversified that it took all our energies to explore it. We barely allowed ourselves time to listen to a heavenly brass band. And then, miracle of miracles, our host presented the three of us together with one nickel to spend as we pleased, though with discretion. We raced to the pavilion where already we'd looked longingly at "rich" people eating sodas and sundacs, and the less privileged ones sucking coloured liquids through straws, or licking from cones topped with something slippery-white.

We didn't know the names or prices of any of these delicacies, and considered them well beyond the means of any Dutchman, largely because none of those who were eating them made any attempts to persecute us. Finally, however, we decided to line ourselves up along the counter and observe closely what transpired, and then by gestures to make our wants known. To our disappointment we soon learned that even the meanest of those things cost a nickel each. We could, of course, take turns licking off an ice cream cone, or get three straws to suck from one bottle of pop, but after considerable discussion, we decided on a bag of popcorn, out of which we first counted ten pieces each, to feed to the geese and ducks. Even then we were humbly grateful to our host.

A few weeks later, a more important event dwarfed everything that had gone before. One morning we found that our father made no effort to go to work even though the sun was shining. Also there was a strange woman on the premises who made herself prodigiously busy without explaining her presence. Father, taking us two oldest boys aside, admonished us to go out and enjoy ourselves as far away from the house as possible, and for as long as we cared, and to take the two youngest boys, Meindert and Kornelis, with us. As for Mother, she simply didn't appear at all; something definitely important was afoot, but the prospect of spending the whole day in the country round our Hollow Way made us hardly stop to wonder about the mysteries at home.

We spent the day fully, exhaustingly. We discovered snakes and snake eggs—this time actually—and turtles and chipmunks. We picked blue flowers that cried sticky tears over our hands. We even ate some harmless looking berries, and allowed ourselves approximately two hours by the sun to die of poison from them. I was the chief guinea-pig for observation, because my stomach

would surely be the first to act up, even though America had already wrought miracles upon my delicate constitution.

Soon we came upon a limpidly clear brook, chattering beguilingly over neat pebbles, so innocent that only God could have made it. Into the brook we went, barefooted, and it was like nothing we'd ever hoped to experience. It was so wonderful that we forgot our impending death from poisoning. Later, when hunger assailed us we couldn't find the mysterious berries again. We stayed in the creek for perhaps three hours and got disconcertingly wet. But the great American sun then simply dried us as if we were mere leaves or petals. We sat beneath tall dark trees then, proclaiming the greatness of America. Rem vowed to be a cowboy, and I a constructor of skyscrapers, while we waited for Meindert's and Kornelis' pants and stockings to dry on the limb of a dead tree.

Then we followed the creek, which soon became somewhat scummy and polluted. It ended practically beneath a church, which judging from all its crosses must be Catholic, and which Rem knew from his private wanderings was Polish. And there suddenly shawled women and goats appeared, so that we couldn't help bursting forth into our own peculiar rendering of Ave Maria, as remembered from the boat. But the few people who heard us seemed dismayed, and when some threatening boys appeared over a sandy hill, we retreated again into the undergrowth, where the creek became a creek again, instead of a hybrid sewer.

We had intended to make that day an infinity, but our stomachs betrayed us. And nowhere could we find the berries which hadn't poisoned us. The two youngest boys now started crying with hunger, then both simply became limp so that we had to carry them, while the sun which had been so benevolent now seemed intent on killing us. Everything in extremes, that's America, our minister had told us from the pulpit, only the Sunday before.

Wocbegone and bedraggled, we at last reached home. It was late afternoon, and our only concern was for food. We saw the strange woman banging away at something in a washtub beneath our heaven tree, but we couldn't muster up any curiosity about her actions. Then Father met us at the door, and there was a strange light upon him—or so it seemed afterwards—and he told us in words that must have been simple but seemed at the time exceedingly complex, that while we had been roaming in the wilderness, God had come to our house and presented us with a new brother.

I remember growing solemn, rather cold, and amazingly

inarticulate. At last I did say: "And he can become President of the United States, can't he, Father? Because we can't. But he was born in America."

And Father said: "Yes, he can become President." Then he went on to tell us very solemnly that now we were more heavily burdened with poverty and cares than before, and that for us two oldest boys the carefree days of childhood were definitely over. God had ordained, when he presented us with this new brother, that we should all put our shoulders to the wheel with greater industry. Adult life with adult cares started for us at that very moment. "Because your mother isn't well, naturally," he added.

Then we looked upon our new brother, a disconcertingly un-beautiful wrinkled red bit of creation, whose name, when once he'd been baptized, would be Jan. He certainly would have to improve himself in countenance and stature before he'd be worthy of the Presidency. And there was Mother in bed, obviously not well at all.

But then hunger came pouncing back upon us. The strange woman said she'd cooked a mess of butter beans for us. We learned then that she was a midwife, who cost twenty-five dollars a week to have around. However, she was an upstanding Christian, in spite of that exorbitant fee to earn which Father would have to work at least two weeks. Her butter beans were badly cooked and hard, and besides there weren't enough of them. Here then suddenly was life, with a yardstick and a whip, and a pair of terrible little scales that measured a pinch of grain for a penny, and a sparrow for a penny. . . . Here St. John's Revelation became applied to us personally and directly. We were even poorer than we had been, because God had been assisted by a doctor who demanded to be paid, and damned promptly. The infant had to have so many new things, American things, and the grace abounding which was its due as a Covenant child seemed as nothing at all compared with its worldly needs.

Soon, too, the mothers of those kids who daily abused us came crowding into our house. They put up a pretence of crowing and warbling over the baby, but immediately thereafter they advised a million new things, because all Dutch things were so wrong that it was a miracle that we older children had ever stayed alive. Incidentally, of course, they had endless slightly used garments, diapers, nipples, booties, cribs and carriages to offer to Mother for only a very slight consideration. And, by God, she had better take them; weren't they all sinners in the face of God, but members of His Covenant withal?

When the infant and Mother—they were both sick, constantly—gained sufficient strength we'd all repair to church, where the child would then be christened Jan. We knew that the American equivalent of Jan was John, and we considered ourselves fortunate that in our family there would be no confusion of names as there had been among some distant relatives of ours. These relatives had sailed from Holland with two young sons, named Jan and Johannes respectively, only to discover in America that both those names were only translatable by the name John. Now those two similar names were like unto thorns in the flesh for both of those boys as well as their parents.

Three days after Jan's birth I started working on a farm. The farmer had sold vegetables to Mother earlier, and had then suggested that he could always use a sturdy, God-fearing boy, at the equivalent of two dollars and fifty cents a week in carrots, potatoes and beans. So one dawn I trudged out to the farm, with high spirits and rare determination, and after reading the correct name upon a mailbox, edged myself warily past a yellow dog, toward a group of people standing by the white farmhouse, watching my approach.

"This then," shouted the obvious head of the house in finging Dutch, "must be our sturdy little helper."

The buxom woman who was his wife gave me some sort of blessing, and remembered something with tears in her eyes. Suddenly, too, all the six sons began shouting and capering; they didn't scorn me at all, but instead bellowed pleasantries at me in pleasantly familiar Dutch. And there was their only sister, an angel-like creature, I decided, who called me "honey" on the spot. Never before had anyone called me anything so charming and beautiful, even though I didn't know what it meant.

These were wonderful people, full of audaciousness and gay abandon. They lived their workaday life without reservations, restrictions, compunctions or inhibitions. They made me sing some Dutch songs at once, because the farmer had heard from my mother that I had a high clear voice. Then peas had to be picked and cows driven to pasture. I picked peas with five of the six sons who persisted in doing me no harm, but kept on being kind and uninhibited in their speech and actions. They were the most generous people I'd ever seen or known, and just when I was starting to lose faith in America, they humanely restored it and increased it.

Soon they prevailed upon me to stay with them nights, instead of trudging back and forth between the farm and my house every day. I slept on their couch, and only went home Saturdays. Day

after day we'd plunge deep into boggy, mysterious swamps where we picked huckleberries, singing at the top of our voices or even quarrelling with each other, as the boys seemed to have accepted me as a brother. We committed a whole succession of minor sins, but I was also exposed to a wonderful conglomeration of honest American virtues which I had never known to exist before. I was bitten by a snake, and learned to be fascinated by snakes thereafter. I was kicked by a horse, and sucked into the swamp, and almost struck by lightning, and it all seemed wonderful to me. On Saturday nights I hated to go back to the city.

Sometimes I slept in the haymow, and I learned the rudiments of farming. I discovered, too, how animals reproduced themselves, and so incidentally learned what girls were for, and why and when, and how boys were supposed to feel when they got old enough. I looked forward to the great day when something inside of me would "plop apart like a hot potato," and I'd be a man. I worshipped the boys' only sister, who kept calling me "honey." I felt completely at home among all that singing, squabbling, shouting, untamed group, and only worried slightly that God hadn't ordained this wonderful life to be for me, and that it all must be an aberration of His plans. But I knew, too, that in September all this would end; then school would start, and the evil days would be there again. Now on sunny days I learned to sing with a strange inflection and accent: "K-k-k-Katy, k-k-k-Katy" and a strictly bucolic version of the sacred "At the Cross," which began: "At the stable, at the stable, where I first met my Mabel. . . ." This, of course, I had translated to me word for word.

The sun made be browner than I'd ever been. By contrast, my hair resembled the palest flax. Mother decided that I was beginning to act ten years too young, and was actually too puppyish in my behaviour to suit my dignified years. For a while it seemed to me that all that sunshine and happiness had penetrated so deep during those summer months, that I had been transformed.

But all that ended when September came.

There came a day called Labour Day, a holiday, which nobody had warned us about. But it transpired that our church was having a picnic in a small, sedate park, called Highland Park, far from the evil places where there were roller coasters, merry-go-rounds and scooters. We three oldest boys were sent to this church party. No doubt we should have taken matters into our own hands and gone without a word to our own blessed Hollow Way, instead of to the sacred grounds where God's own elect were picnicking. Unfortunately we wore our Dutch belts, wide, elastic

ones with ornamental silver clasps. And so we were set upon as soon as we arrived at the park. All that day we were kept at bay, at the fringes of the picnic, by the very children who attended Sunday school with us. We couldn't even get near the lemonade barrel. In the end we decided to take off the offending belts and sneak upon the feast through the trees, but even thus disguised, we were chased off again.

When we came home, we protested to our parents in no uncertain terms about the way we had been treated, and demanded justice. But during our absence some unbelievably kind women had descended upon the house and presented us—gratis, to our astonishment—with a house organ, three large gilt-framed pictures, and some sort of taboret. Now at last we had some furniture in our little parlour, and we were somewhat comforted. We decided that our parlour was now magnificent, not by the standards we'd known in Holland, but by those very low American standards which were now part of our way of life.

I sat myself down at the organ at once and brought forth some kind of music, which we all considered heavenly. Henceforth, I decided, I'd dedicate my life to the organ.

But little Jan started wailing. Playing the organ became impossible. The infant was always sick, and someone had to watch over him day and night. We didn't trust our doctor; we knew he drank, and he was reputed to be a dope fiend, but we owed him so much money that we didn't dare to offend him by calling in another. Then came a black-bordered letter from Holland saying that Great Beppe had died suddenly, and a week later our mother took to bed with a strange malady which no one could explain or cure.

Little Jan, thereupon, came to be my special care.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### TRAIN UP A CHILD IN THE WAY HE SHOULD GO

THE DAY AFTER LABOUR DAY we children were sent to a Christian school, one of the schools approved of and supported by our Dutch Christian Reformed Church. Poor as we were, our parents felt duty bound to pay a considerable tuition fee each week for the privilege of sending us to such a school, where we'd be safely separated from the evil teachings and



temptations of the world. We realized that now we were living in a worldly, abysmally sinful country, but that even here it was possible to perpetuate our Dutch religious ways. We could still be directed toward sanctification in good old-country, Dutch fashion, even if our instruction was going to be in English.

We children took all this for granted. In Holland we had belonged to the purists, the elect, the sanctified. Certainly in America it wouldn't be necessary to surrender these sacred privileges. Rather, it became important to guard them all the more jealously. We were still too close to Holland, too abysmally ignorant of America, to see any anomaly in our changed situation and ideals. In Holland there had been for centuries a practically equal division between agnostics and Calvinists. The former were largely responsible for Holland's excellent reputation as a country where freedom of religion, of speech, and the Press were actually practised. Things which couldn't even be printed in France appeared in Holland without censorship.

From such untrammelled free-thinking, the Calvinistic half of the populace considered it necessary to separate themselves. They had always constantly attended their numerous churches, and now they also started devising means of religious instruction to counteract the very beguiling teachings of "the enemy." In a way it became a healthy rivalry; even in new methods and experimental ways of teaching the Calvinists hardly dared to fall behind the agnostics. Numerically the rival groups were too nearly equal.

In America, however, the problem was different. In the first place only the Calvinistic, more discontented half of the Dutch populace seemed to move to America, especially to the Middle West. Here then they found no fellow countrymen to contend against, but instead an overwhelming majority of "aliens," that is, Americans. The latter might be good Baptists or Methodists or Episcopalians, but the only thing that mattered to the Hollanders was that they did not worship or conduct themselves in the Calvinistic way. The Hollanders, therefore, deemed it necessary to separate themselves from these worldly Americans, and especially to perpetuate the Christian schools to guard the young people against their influence.

Naturally, there was no real rivalry in America. The Americans, if they noticed the Christian schools at all, were merely somewhat vaguely puzzled by them. There was no need therefore, and certainly no chance as far as finances went, for any rivalry with the American public schools. But God and his preachers ordained this separation from the world, whether the

practical results proved it worthwhile or not. The heavenly results would justify everything. In this way, the American Dutch almost invariably justify the maintenance of their Christian schools. However, in spite of their heavenly aspirations, they are nearly always hell-bent to become American in all material things.

Our particular school was a frame building with eight rooms standing on a small plot of ground. Over its door it bore an inscription in large letters: TRAIN UP A CHILD IN THE WAY HE SHOULD GO. *Prov. 22:6*. Here our new ordeal began. That it would be an ordeal, we had already anticipated, but anticipation proved hardly equal to reality.

To my humiliation, I was put back in grade six-one, and assigned one of the oversized desks in the rear of the room where the near-imbeciles were segregated until the day they could be granted a permit to leave school and go to work. Once I'd been seated there, everybody seemed at a loss as to what to do with me next, until finally I was supplied with a second-grade reader and a dog-eared Dutch-English dictionary and put to work translating. On the whole, however, it was simply taken for granted that my mental capacities were of the same low calibre as those of my imbecilic neighbours, perhaps because of my fumbling English. I wanted to participate in what were to me elementary arithmetical problems, and indicated on paper what I could do. Mere figures, however, didn't speak loudly enough. I drew better maps than any of the others, but that was taken to be merely an idiosyncrasy.

Still, I remember my first teacher with a great deal of respect. She was one of those patient, quiet, self-effacing, yet firm and practical women who honestly tried to put the teachings of the New Testament into practice. I knew that I was an extra burden to her and tried to bother her as little as possible: she on her part, however, tried to help me as much as she could. Frequently, she repeated her lectures in simple Dutch for my benefit. And though her salary could hardly have amounted to ten dollars a week, she put her whole soul into the job of teaching us, and contributed one-tenth of her meagre salary to the cause of the Lord.

I remember worrying about whether I myself would have the courage, if I should make ten dollars a week, to set aside a whole dollar for the Church and missions. But most of the time I kept myself busy with my translations, or listened eagerly to the few classes I was included in, such as those in Bible discussion and American history. Then one day, the overgrown lugubrious girl whose desk was next mine arrived in class with a note from her

parents, saying that she should no longer be humiliated by having to sit beside a Dutchie like me.

I was moved again, into a corner. On my right hand sat a good-natured, smelly farm lad of nearly sixteen, and in front of me sat a girl almost his age who was very stupid but also very amorous. She immediately started bestowing her favours upon me and the farm lad indiscriminately, feeding us lumpy candy, displaying her garters to us and insisting that we copy her invariably erroneous lessons. Frequently, however, the farm boy had been in such close contact with skunks and other smelly fauna that he was ordered home as soon as he entered the class room. Or he'd arrive barefooted, and would be sent back to the farm for his shoes. We had little to say to each other, but he was willing to be pleasant to me and to defend my cause when he happened to be near. Many years later he became a very successful and prosperous bootlegger.

Rem, for the time being, suffered more than any of us. For the first time in his life he was subjected to female teachers, and he was humiliated and angered. In the fourth grade, to which he had been assigned, he rebelled constantly and persistently. When his teacher tried to punish him, he simply fought back, and when he was locked in the schoolroom after school he climbed out of the window and made his escape down a drainpipe. America, he decided had done him dirt; he couldn't bear to think of all the years till he would be sixteen and old enough to be taken out of school.

In the meanwhile our teachers' chief concern seemed to be over our Dutch names. They should be Americanized. Mine was all right, and didn't have to be changed at all, though my teacher embarrassed me before all the other pupils by insisting on telling them that it meant "beloved." Rem's name was soon transformed into Raymond, and he didn't seem to mind particularly. But when Meindert's teacher attempted to change his name to Melvin, or Menno, or Mino, he rebelled. He was only eight, but he refused to have his name altered by even so much as one letter. In fact, he added Rem's cast-off Dutch name to his own, and stubbornly signed himself Meindert Remmeren: no one was ever strong or clever enough to make him change his mind. Also people soon began advising us to change our last name to De Young, and so remove somewhat the stigma of being Dutch. On the other hand, other people told us that it would be altogether too pretentious for emigrants as green as we to change our name so soon. We had better wait two or three years before we started putting on airs.

In the classroom our plight wasn't really so bad, however; at least not as long as we didn't make any attempts to express ourselves in English, which invariably caused the class to burst forth in uncontrollable laughter, even though sixty per cent of the pupils could only speak with the heaviest of Dutch brogues. It was before and after school and during recess that we suffered most. The silly little bland-faced American-Dutch girls would shrink away from us, delicately gathering in their little skirts and screwing up their noses. The boys submitted us to harsher indignities which were physically much more painful. Usually it was best for our welfare to keep ourselves at a safe distance till the school bell summoned us inside.

But there were other sorts of persecution which hurt us more. Whenever a dime was lost on the school grounds, we were accused of having stolen it. When a fence or banister was broken, we got the blame. We were kept at a distance so that we couldn't reach the line before the door in time, and were then punished for being tardy. Over and over again, we had to submit ourselves to the principal to be punished, to be questioned, to have our pockets searched for the things we had been accused of stealing, to have our palms struck with a ruler for assumed insults against the janitor, neighbours or older girls, of which we were completely innocent. From the beginning, however, we didn't mention any of these things at home. Our own particular pride kept us from it, what with Mother constantly sick, the baby always ailing, and Father overworked.

We had to find our own salvation. Also our own revenge, especially after we'd been punished for wrongs we'd never even contemplated, let alone perpetrated. But there was as yet little opportunity for revenge. It was much simpler to stay away from school. Already we were chased off the school grounds every day when we appeared, and kept at a safe distance. It was so simple to avoid the unjust punishment for arriving too late in line by not appearing at all, but hiding in a near-by city dump. The latter form of escape appealed especially to Rem, of whom Meindert was now a willing disciple.

My problems, after the first ten days of school, were altogether different. I had to take care of the sick baby every free moment I had, from the time I got up in the morning at five-thirty, till I had to dash for school, frequently running the half-mile in four minutes. Then at noon, I'd usually summon my brothers from the dump where they had taken refuge, and would hurry home with them. In the afternoon, matters would more or less repeat themselves along the same pattern, except that I'd hurry home

immediately after school to take care of the ailing child until I went to bed late in the evening. I had so much to do that it was practically impossible for me to appear in the schoolyard in time for anyone to chase me off. Often the principal would give me notes to be handed to my father, asking him to explain why Rem and Meindert were absent, but I would merely destroy them. Sometimes when I made the error of arriving thirty seconds too early at school, I'd be chased off myself, and would have to join them in the old dump. Our sanctuary was a gully between two steep hills, filled with all sorts of rubbish, where it was easy to hide from the prying eyes of policemen and truant officers. Those hours in the dump would be the only time for relaxation I'd have for weeks at a time.

My existence became horrible. I aged more that winter than I had done in all my previous thirteen years. I felt my responsibility for the sick child heavily. I fretted about him when I was in school. And though the school hours should have afforded me with the only respite from worries that I could find during the day, I started dreading going to school because of all the mistreatment I received. I became morose and quiet, unhealthily introspective and, to justify myself and my existence, I became excessively religious. There seemed nowhere else to turn, so at thirteen I turned violently to God.

Only in church, which we had to attend three times on Sundays, did I feel secure. Enraptured, I'd follow our minister's Dutch sermons which dealt especially with predestination, special and common grace, and like my parents I started worrying about the safety of the baby's soul, since he hadn't yet been well enough to be carried to church to be baptized. The subject of infant damnation, about which our preacher was very articulate, fascinated me fearfully. The child simply had to live and be baptized, and he had to get well through my prayers and my ministrations.

Perhaps as a result of this, our minister became the only man who ever had a word of praise or commendation for me. During the catechism classes in the middle of the week he would make me sit on a bench directly in front of him, and whenever any of the other members of the class were stumped for an answer, he would smile upon me benignly and say: "Now, David, now you tell this bunch of sheepheads, those dull lumps of fat and pork there behind you, what is the answer to my question." I never failed him. Invariably he would mark my homework, "Excellent, plus, *zeer goed*." All of which pleased my parents no end, but certainly didn't make me more popular with boys my own age. Still, it was the only chance I had left to prove that I wasn't a nitwit.

Steadily I became more imbued with theological lore, and gradually I began to withdraw myself consciously from the glitter of the world, of which God knows I had had opportunity to see very little. I think I must have been an intolerably old and solemn-acting little man, wholly concerned with family cares, completely absorbed by a distorted, practically pathological affection for the slowly dying child entrusted to my care. But I couldn't help being what circumstances forced me to be. I even tried not to mind the persecution I suffered at school, because I thought I was being tested by God for a greater purpose which I couldn't as yet understand. Urged on by my mother, I also started working on my two brothers, who, however, would have none of my teachings, and were only worried that now I might start feeling duty bound to tell Father about their escapades at school or away from it. Naturally, they didn't realize that unintentionally they were making life as difficult as possible for me. While I was trying to get the meals, keep the house clean, and be a mother in proxy to them, they went their own irresponsible ways, and left it up to me to keep them out of trouble, or to search for them after nightfall and bring them safely home. I was torn between my loyalty toward those two and my duty as a Christian and the acting manager of the house.

At last, however, I couldn't keep the school principal's imperative notes from Father any longer. I warned my brothers that they'd come to the end of the tether. The latest note from the principal said that they hadn't been to school for five consecutive days, and demanded that our father give some explanation immediately. Both Rem and Meindert bade me to be quiet, however; they would deal with the new ultimatum from the principal in their own way. I suspected that their own way might be pretty fallible, but there was little I could do about it.

On a piece of paper torn from his school composition book, eight-year-old Meindert informed the principal in rather too ecclesiastical Dutch that he and Rem were seriously ill, and signed Father's name. Rem was satisfied and decided to abide by what his younger brother had written. The result was a letter from the principal which came by mail and which I didn't dare to intercept. It informed Father that Rem was already practically in the hands of the truant officer, but demanded that Father himself mete out punishment to Meindert for the forgery of the note.

By the time the letter came, the truant officer had already taken Rem in hand. He was a gargantuan sort of fellow who ushered Rem into his Ford and, with the intention of putting the fear of God into him, drove him several times around the block.

But Rem was innocent of the man's intentions, which had been explained to him in English. In his own guileless way, by sign language or no language at all, he managed to work himself into the graces of the big man, and they ended up by going fishing together. They remained great friends and boon companions thereafter, and the principal was told that she'd made a grave error in judgment.

Meindert, however, was given a severe spanking. Still, none of us had as yet told Father about all the indignities we suffered daily at school. This, however, seemed the crucial moment. With poor Meindert still smarting from the blows he had received and deprived of our meagre dinner, I took it upon myself to tell Father what was going on at our Christian school. He was considerably taken aback, and that very same evening, after due prayer and meditation, he wrote one of the most angry and just letters he'd ever written, and told me to give it to the principal the next day.

From that day on we were treated more respectfully, certainly more distantly. Also I was given special permission to take my three-year-old brother Kornelis with me to school; it was no longer possible to leave him at home with the irrevocably dying infant and our ailing mother. He was an even-tempered, lovable, red-cheeked youngster, given to quiet, observing ways, and he proved too of exemplary behaviour there at a vacant desk beside me, with his box of wax crayons and penny pad of paper. Soon, however, it became necessary for me to stay out of school altogether. Our doctor blandly declared that Mother's case was hopeless. He'd already lost interest in the baby, and now announced that he was leaving everything henceforth up to Nature. Rather, up to Nature and to me. He hinted, furthermore, that we were nothing but stupid Dutchmen to bother him at all with our hopeless problems, and that it would have been much better for us to have remained in our native smelly lowlands.

I carried on as well as I could, but one morning in November even I had to admit that the end had come. That morning poor little Jan lay shrivelled in his crib, whimpering with pain, cramping his shrunken blue legs so tightly against his emaciated little body that I couldn't straighten them out again. His wails grew hoarser and hoarser, and finally sounded like feeble barks. I rushed out of the house to find Father, who was working on the other side of the city, but as I ran, I sobbed and prayed, and kept clutching desperately at my faith. After all, I was demanding so little of God, no mountains to be moved, but only one small child to be kept alive.

After Father had come home, he told me to stay outdoors and try to calm down a little. But I sat down on the front steps and waited on tenterhooks for the new doctor to arrive, so that soon Father sent me on an errand downtown. As I walked back home through the cold dripping November dusk, I had a premonition of what had happened, long before I reached the house.

I couldn't bring myself to open the door. I would start running away, and then would turn back again. It was raining, but I let the rain drench me. I sat down at last beneath the dripping heaven tree, knowing God had failed me. Then Father came out of the house and found me there. He did not say anything, but he took my hand and led me slowly into the kitchen, past the strangers who were sitting there, into the room where I didn't want to go. But his work-hardened hand kept kneading mine gently. . . .

Somehow that day ended. But in the night my faith came back insidiously, cruelly. Hadn't Elijah stretched himself over the widow's son seven times and hadn't the child come back to life? I remembered again that faith could move mountains. I heard the clock strike two, and then without any fear of awakening Rem and Meindert with whom I shared a bed, I tiptoed toward our little front parlour. Rain droned ceaselessly against the window panes. In my parents' room the talking and sobbing had ended some time ago. The rain and wind against the house deadened all the small sounds I made; I was rigid with anticipation, stern with faith.

The light from the street lamp fanned fitfully across the little rococo parlour organ, but also over the lonely little white box of a coffin which stood on top of the tiny, second-hand table. All I would have to do was to lift the coffin with its emaciated little body which I'd carried in my arms so often from that table and put it on the floor. And then God would be a witness to my faith, that unspeakable and unquenchable faith which could not be denied.

For a little while I stood there in the centre of the red rug, hardly daring to breathe, incapable of any motion. There were no flowers in the room, no flowers anywhere, not even surrounding the simple white ribbon which had been tacked beside the front door. This was going to be the beginning, or the end, to so much. My eyes at last rested unwaveringly on the little white coffin, and I could approach it without trembling.

So far I hadn't as yet looked upon the dead child. But now I would be able to, because he wouldn't be long dead. He might even now be alive and smile up at me, as he hadn't done for more



than four weeks. If I lifted the cover. . . . If I could. . . . Then I lifted it without a qualm, and I found myself looking upon that remote, shrivelled, white little face. It didn't smile. It looked so awfully dead, so far beyond all realization and sensation. Then I bent over it, and kissed the cold stiff lips . . . and I knew I was kissing death only, and feeling death, and smelling death, and faith was no longer there beside me or in me or behind me.

Now I couldn't lift the coffin from the table. Hastily I lowered the lid and hurried out of the parlour and back into bed, but as I lay shivering against Rem, I couldn't cry. Whatever it was that I felt or couldn't feel turned me into cold, staring rigidity. Dawn came and I got up and dressed. I hadn't slept. But there was much to be done. My motions didn't seem to be mine, they seemed oddly distant and mechanical. I wanted to hear someone say to me: "Why don't you cry? Why don't you cry? Oh, why don't you?" Because then I would have, and it would have been better. But no one said it.

The minister came to the funeral. The minister said to God in a prayer that He, God, in His inscrutable wisdom and love and grace, was the only one who knew whether the soul of this dead Covenant child had been saved, even though it had not been baptized. Later he repeated those words for consolation to my parents. He did not say them to me.

At the cemetery the little box was lowered into a raw, yellow hole, very shallow. It was in a neglected corner of the graveyard, and even the sexton a few weeks later had forgotten where it was, but suggested that we hunt for it in four possible locations. All I could remember was that an almost leafless lilac had stood dripping near it, among a few cracked and fallen monuments.

I was thirteen. I was too young to feel like a father, a mother, a guardian, someone fallen from grace and deprived of faith. But that was how I felt. Certainly I had lost God as a personal friend. But no one said: "Go on, why don't you cry?" No one was that much concerned over me. Those who might have were absorbed in their own grief.

When the following Monday I could start going to school again, I went early, without caring much what might befall me. One of the neighbouring kids fell in step with me. He was an especially foul-mouthed, scabby kid, and he immediately said to me: "Well, Dutchie, ain't you happy that there cry-baby of yours is dead? Maybe now you won't have to stick in the house all the time. . . ."

I don't think he knew what had happened to him until he was lying beneath me on the sidewalk, and I was slapping away at his mouth, and banging his head against the flagstones. He kept

lying there, even when at last I got up and continued on my way to school. Not until I was a whole block away did he dare to get up.

It was a substitute for tears, a much-needed release of all my pent-up emotions.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE STREET CALLED DONALD PLACE

WE MOVED FROM THAT first ill-fated house on Sint Nikolaas Day, without any festivities. It was bitterly cold while we transported our few pieces of furniture on a pushcart to an alley two blocks away. The alley was called Donald Place, and our new house had two upstairs rooms, beside the usual narrow-windowed ones downstairs. We were coming up in the world, but largely at the insistence of a fellow Christian who persuaded us to borrow money from him at seven per cent interest because we were all children of God. The house sagged so much that not a door would stay closed, and not a window was capable of being opened. The floor boards had cracked open so wide that we could look down into the stagnant pools of water in the basement, which, however, soon luckily froze over. We moved, because it was always better not to offend a fellow churchman. For firewood he foisted upon us at what he called a reasonable price several wagon-loads of stumps which he had blasted from his farm. Almost gratis, he also gave us a coal stove which fell to pieces three days later.

Rem was now kept out of mischief every day by trying to chop the old stumps into pieces small enough to fit our several decrepit stoves. Naturally, the old roots wouldn't burn, or the stoves wouldn't digest them, or we were just being hopelessly stupid Dutchmen again. Anybody's opinion went. Mother blamed America. She now lay constantly in the front room, gradually growing worse and worse, most of the time now in a semi-coma from all the opiates the doctor gave her, perhaps in his peculiar efforts to let Nature take its course.

The house had been painted a mocha-pudding brown, and it stood at the extreme end of the narrow, dead-end alley. Crossing our yard and continuing its devious way between several barns and sheds ran a semi-public path by which we could reach another street, which in turn brought us two blocks closer to our

church and school, an advantage for which our new landlord might well have charged us an extra two or three dollars monthly.

As soon as we were settled, Rem and I started out long before dawn each morning to shovel snow off the walks of the rich Americans who lived on Lake Drive, Cherry, Benjamin and Auburn streets. We received about twenty-five cents per walk, and within a few weeks we had earned enough money to be able to march downtown and buy straw matting for our drafty floors. We carried the heavy rolls of matting home on our shoulders, in too triumphant a mood to trust the store's delivery system. The next week we bought six amber glass mantles to decorate our naked gas jets. They lasted barely three minutes each after the gas was lighted; then crackled ignominiously to the floor. Our brief state of pride and glory was over, and Father, who had carried Mother from her bed to behold the wonder, put her back in bed once more, where she turned her face to the wall to hide her disappointment from us. Bravely we went forth again the next morning to earn better and stronger mantles.

Christmas came, but Father declared we could not desecrate the day with any gift-giving. American customs or no American customs, we'd continue to give our presents on Sint Nikolaas Day, if ever we became rich enough again to buy any. Still, Rem and I had saved up fifty cents together, and with it we bought ten five-cent presents for our youngest brothers, and hid the gifts in their clothes. On Christmas Day someone, no doubt mistakenly, left a pound of mixed nuts at our door, and late that evening a very slight acquaintance gave all us boys together one yellow car for a toy train, evidently in the hope that someone else would present us with the rest, including the tracks on which to run it. That completed our Christmas celebration.

The people in our new street were more negative in their reactions toward us than those of Freyling Place. They quite deftly managed to leave us alone, but salved their consciences with the usual Christian apologies. However, there was one exception. One very hard-working kindly woman with a large family of her own would occasionally find a few minutes between her household duties and all the laundry work she took in to cheer up our household with her ever-sanguine spirits. For the rest, our neighbours, even though they were all churchgoers of the right denomination, volubly discussed "the poor ailing Dutch woman with her burdensome family of boys," but did absolutely nothing to help. They were merely fellow Hollanders of the faith, and some day they might extend a helping hand, if it wouldn't prove unprofitable. For the rest, God would provide. Wasn't He already

providing by keeping us precariously alive, and hoping and struggling?

In spite of everything, we were becoming more Americanized. Naturally, we came in more frequent contact with real Americans now, those foolish people whose walks we shovelled, and who really must be slightly insane, because they were actually kind to us without any thought of gain. We accepted what they offered us, but with secret misgivings. They were the silly people who occasionally allowed us to swing in their swings, to pick apples from their trees, or to eat the slices of cake and pie that they gave us, because we were "so cute," and our attempts at English were "so darling." Silly, really, those women who touched our rosy Dutch cheeks to see if the red would come off, and then questioned us about the secret of our clear complexions. Silly, too, those men who were amazed that our parents paid good money to send us to what they called inferior Christian schools, when we could attend public schools which were more wholesomely American. These people must be those childlike Americans the Dutch were always talking about, who didn't even know about God's command that children should be brought up according to His sacred precepts.

Those Americans, however, paid us double or triple for the walks we shovelled, the leaves we raked, the rubbish we removed for them. That was what counted; everything in America had to pay. They were the ones who asked us childish questions about Holland, and invariably mentioned that boy who was supposed to have stuck his fingers in the dike. Sometimes they wanted to know if our parents had any peasant lace, pieces of furniture, ceramics, or even old postage stamps. We hardly dared to answer them seriously; they seemed so foolish that we kept expecting them to take off their comic masks and talk about God and money and worth and virtue instead. But they never did. They didn't even persecute us, or look down on us; so how could they be solid, and genuine and wholesome?

And all the things to eat they gave us. Such wantonness, such waste . . . such foolishly pleasant, such insanely lovely, such beguilingly childlike people. Yes, we loved them in spite of our strong reservations. Frequently they handed us seventy-five cents, when we demanded only fifty; on the other hand, they might quibble half an hour over five cents and then hand us an extra fifty cents' worth in soap chips, crackers, canned mushroom soup and what not, simply because they'd won their argument. Often enough they paid us with little cheques for a dollar or seventy-five cents, which we always had difficulty in cashing, as naturally we

had no bank accounts, and the neighbourhood stores were suspicious of all cheques. Of course, we could never aspire to become Americans like them, not like those privileged ones.

Gradually, tortuously, however, we were adjusting ourselves, and even bettering ourselves a little. Father now earned the magnificent sum of thirty-five cents an hour. Slowly an all-important goal was being reached: our debts were being paid off, even those fat sums of interest which our well-meaning friends invariably demanded. Some day we'd be out of debt. How important a day that seemed . . . no longer hopelessly unreachable as it used to be. Then we'd start buying some furniture for the house, some meat for our meals, and perhaps we could then get some real medical care for Mother. . . . Or, oh, ambitious plan! we could buy our own house, and put in running water and electricity, and perhaps build on a brick porch, as all the other Dutch Americans were doing. Perhaps in another decade we'd be back on the plane where we had been in Holland, though, of course, inwardly more bereft, empty, disillusioned, plundered.

Pake David had died, we learned from another black-bordered letter. Strangely, it didn't seem to give me any relief, as I had anticipated; but Mother lapsed into still further remoteness and hopelessness. Other friends in Wierum died. "Soon there will be none left to go back to," she sobbed. "Soon those that are left there won't know us." She at least was determined to go back some day.

My brothers were adjusting themselves more easily than I did. They had the opportunity and time; they even had some friends as well as plenty of enemies. I had neither. They also were more amenable to new ways than I seemed to be. Of course, we were still being chased and scorned by most of the Dutch children, but some other more helpless families had more recently come from Holland and we weren't quite the most desirable victims any longer.

I actually had no time or chance to make friends or enemies, or to conduct myself like a normal boy of thirteen. I was learning English rapidly enough, but I was accused of "talking like a book." My ears weren't yet adjusted enough to differentiate between colloquial and book English. Eventually I came to talk like a history book, and to know more about past events in Chile, Peru and Guatemala than current events in our Donald Place.

My day started at six in the morning, when I helped Father get to work by packing his lunch and getting breakfast, which

amounted to little more than some margarine-smeared bread. I would then take care of my brothers, wash the dishes, make the beds, and dust and sweep as much as I could before rushing off to school. At noon and after school, I finished what I hadn't been able to do earlier, and did additional housework, till at last by eight or nine in the evening I might find an hour to read. None of us were allowed on the street after seven. I soon discovered that there was a public library branch nearby where books could be had free. Even Dutch books. But I'd already made up my mind that I was going to apply myself solely to English. In any case, my parents knew that the library was public, hence un-Christian, and so I wasn't allowed to read any of the fiction that it had to offer. Father laid down a blanket censorship: No novels in Dutch, no fiction in English, no sermons, no homilies, no verses, no frumperies (books of comic like one I brought home one day for my little brother Kornelis), no adverse philosophies. That seemed to cover everything that he could specify. There was little left but history and geography; moreover, all the atlases seemed to be reference books and could not be taken out.

So I started to read histories: any history, whether it might be of Nepal, Haiti, or Tasmania. These became the teething rings on which I cut my knowledge of the English language. Well-meaning librarians would lead me cooingly to children's histories of such humdrum countries as Switzerland or Norway, with the Bobbsey Twins and all sorts of country cousins thrown in. But I remained strangely adamant, and no doubt the dear women soon imagined I must be finding something smutty in my histories, or I couldn't possibly be so stubborn in my choice.

Sundays I still went willingly to all three church services to listen to our fiery preacher, who even called his own congregation "clumsy saddles of meat," when the spirit was upon him. He'd point his finger at the smug worshippers in the front pews and bellow: "And you, you bland-faced Pharisees, do you know that your children there in the back pews are heading straight for hell?" He was exciting when he expounded the prophecies of Ezekiel, Daniel and St. John, with more historical and geographical details than I'd ever heard from any pulpit. But he also preached about the Song of Solomon, and once he declared solemnly: "As for me, I love to gaze upon a woman's naked breasts, because a woman's breasts are beautiful, as the Bible tells us. But you, my listeners, tell me, did you ever look at your wives' breasts without either lechery or shame?" On this occasion several of the women swept indignantly out of the church, dragging their children behind them.

Four-year-old Kornelis simply lived for those Sundays. They provided him with more entertainment than any weekday game ever could. Naturally, he was still confined to the house almost all the time, watching over our sick mother. But he usually whiled the time away by preaching sermons in imitation of our minister, even to the jutting jaw, the flashing eye, the snarling phrases, the violent gestures. In church he'd absorb every phrase and gesture he could understand, and at home he'd mimic them almost perfectly. We were the subject of his tirades and denouncements, and became so used to it that being condemned to eternal suffering became a matter of daily routine for us.

That then was life in America, in Donald Place, during that winter when I was thirteen.

Then suddenly one afternoon I acquired five enemies to enrich my dreary life and render it more colourful and perhaps more purposeful. In the first street we had lived in, there was a particularly repulsive piece of male humanity who, though nearly sixteen, also attended our Christian grammar school. He was a typical bully, but also an oversexed pathological case, who never washed himself and preferred to wear a butcher's blood-spattered jacket and straw cuffs for his daily costume. Ninety per cent of his talk and actions revolved around the subject of sex; he was perhaps the most open and uninhibited exhibitionist I'd ever known. For some time, when he'd meet me alone, he'd been trying to inveigle me into some perverse practices with him. But because I didn't like him for the way he treated me in general, the way he smelled and dressed, I shunned him. Usually I was simply too busy to be able to concern myself with him.

Unfortunately, one afternoon I stumbled upon him and one of our eighth grade girls right behind the barn that flanked our property. In amazement I looked upon something which I'd never seen before in my life, but it certainly was not "beauty bare," whatever else it was. I retreated in good order and thought no more of it, though I soon enough learned that I had offended him by accidentally appearing on the scene.

My Nemesis came a few days later. While I was hurrying home by the usual short cut between the barns, I found myself surrounded by five eighth grade boys. Their leader was the fellow in the butcher's coat, and he at once commanded the others to hold me and stand me up against the barn, while he started punching me in the groin, and in the face, and in the solar plexus. I simply crumpled up with pain, whereupon the five took to their heels and ran. For a long time I lay there between those barns, unable

to move, hardly able to breathe. I felt that I was dying, and even wanted to die to get the pain over with.

At last I was able to crawl away from there on hands and knees, across the dirty, melting snow. I crawled into our kitchen, where my little brother stood looking at me in horrified amazement, while Mother called querulously from her room: "But, David, why are you so late? You'd better start getting the supper at once." I couldn't even speak, but I gestured to Kornelis not to say anything to her.

At last I could move around a bit on my feet, but when Father came home I told him I was sick, and went to bed. I lay in bed shivering with pain, but also planning revenge. I was going to get each one of those five boys individually, and their leader especially, and without the help of Rem; that is if I ever got over this awful pain. "Vengeance is mine . . . saith the Lord," but I no longer had that simple kind of faith. Besides, the Lord's honour hadn't been at stake in this case, unless very, very indirectly. Still, I told God of my plight in my prayer, and even asked to be forgiven for the vengeance I was going to take into my own hands. Surely my prayer must have come close to the Biblical "intercession . . . with groanings which cannot be uttered."

Three of my assailants would have to cross our yard to reach their homes. I would take them on separately when the occasion presented itself. I wasn't afraid. I was simply unacquainted with the American way of fighting, but no one was going to be my second. Neither was I going to use sticks and stones.

My first bout filled me with contempt for all my enemies. Though my first victim was older than I was, he showed such unalloyed fear when he emerged from between the barns and found me waiting for him that I didn't even leap upon him, but allowed him to stand still first and get ready to fight in his own fashion. But he took to his heels, and I ran after him. We raced across back yards and leaped over hencoops and fences, but finally I cornered him in an old garden between last summer's cabbage stalks. He didn't even put up a fight.

I got two of the others in the same way, in my own time. Considerably later, one of these boys became a friend of mine, and confessed to me: "I wouldn't have fought you then on a bet. I looked at your face and was scared stiff. You had the devil in your eyes." I had the devil in my system, too, and after each fight, I again asked God to forgive me, and promised that I would do away with all pugnaciousness as soon as He delivered my last enemy into my hands, much as the Old Testament kings must have prayed.



My fourth victim wasn't a particularly formidable one. He was sly and wily, and he always outshouted the others with his:

*Dutchman, Dutchman, belly fulla straw,  
Can't say nothing but: ja, ja, ja.*

He'd have to be dealt with in a different fashion. Once cornered, I knew he wouldn't run; he'd whimper and threaten to tell his father on me. There was one way to get him; after church, when he was walking sedately homeward ahead of his father and mother. I marched up to him, slapped his face several times and kicked him in the shins. Then when his father started after me, I simply sprinted out of reach and ran home through back yards.

There was only the repulsive bully left. Already I was edified to see that he avoided me and only stood his ground when he was surrounded with his cronies. Whenever I encountered him alone, he skipped around corners. Once I tested my power over him by pursuing him, but he kept running, and I found myself cornered in a back yard with the man that owned it threatening me with his garden rake. Unfortunately, something more powerful caught up with the bully before I could myself. He disappeared from school, and there were various filthy rumours about him. Never in all my life did I set eyes on him again, but my vengeance is still ready, just in case I ever come across him.

I sometimes feel that this episode should have ended in a way typical of American fiction. After I'd stood my ground and proved myself, I should have been accepted by all my former enemies, and feared and revered by them. Nothing of the sort happened, nor did I expect it to. I simply kept going my lonely way, gradually getting more hard-worked, more worried, more burdened with family cares.

Then it was June again, and our first year in America was over. School ended, but I realized I couldn't go back to the farm again to work. That paradise was lost. I had to stay around the house to do the work my mother couldn't do. But in my spare time I worked in a butcher shop, grinding hamburger, rendering lard, scraping meat off bones, delivering packages. Also, in the early morning hours, I cut the grass and sprinkled the lawns of rich Americans. I wasn't quite fourteen, but I conducted myself like a man of thirty-eight, and found very little pleasure in life.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### THE MILK OF HUMAN KINDNESS

THAT SUMMER, PERHAPS ONLY because the warm sun brought them out of their snug houses, the neighbours over their back fences decided that something should be done about the sick Dutch woman at the end of the court. Shyly, as if they were committing a crime, they started dropping in on us offering their solicitude, exclaiming rather helplessly that they wondered why they'd been so neglectful of us till now.

They found our house bare but clean. And Mother, perhaps lacking any of her proverbial light to hide under a bushel basket, proudly hid our misery there. We boys were so good to her, she explained, we could do everything that needed to be done; of course, we hadn't had any hot meals except on Sundays for months, but still. . . . So the good women would dust or sweep a room that didn't need it, do a bit of washing, carry a bowl of soup to Mother, and then return to their own humble houses and their own many cares. Still, our problem was becoming the most important topic in the neighbourhood; people from far down the street were starting to take notice of us, and even their children substituted curiosity for previous scorn and hostility.

Then far toward the end of the summer there actually came a week during which the neighbours were willing to keep an eye on Mother and the house while I went back to the farm to help pick vegetables. All summer Rem had been hired out to a dirt farmer, and now Meindert was pressed into service to do the most necessary housework. But my week at the farm turned out to be a disappointment. I constantly worried about home, and the American rural scene, which had seemed almost exotic last year, had lost its pristine charm for me. Also I had become more ingrown, self-conscious and suspicious, so that the daughter of the house no longer called me "honey"; and I refused to sing the old Dutch songs to them now that my clear soprano was beginning to break into guttural undertones. I tried so hard to recapture the gay abandon of the previous summer, but it kept eluding me. I learned to sing "Go Feather Your Nest," "Smile the While," with ribald variations, but I did so self-consciously. Innocence seemed to be fleeing almost visibly away from me, looking over her

shoulder like a shy filly, but showing no real inclination to return. I marvelled at this, and regretted it, but could do nothing to prevent it.

One desperate final day, I forced myself to curse aloud, I almost allowed myself to be seduced, I looked at a girl's legs with hard, lascivious eyes, I wanted to forsake all goodness, duty and obedience for ever. That mood didn't even last a day.

Still, when catechism classes started again in September, I decided I was no longer going to be the only sheep among the goats. I was no longer going to separate myself from the common herd and sit in lonely reverence at our minister's feet. I marched to the back row and seated myself between those boys who were considered the most hopeless, and they readily enough made room for me, perhaps considering my defection as a personal triumph for them.

But I didn't sit there long. When our minister marched in and surveyed the room with dour anticipation, his eyes immediately fell upon me sitting there in the seats of the wicked. He marched up to me at once, and wagging an angry finger at me, he shouted: "David, what are you doing there in the midst of those heathen?" I wanted to tell him that I was sitting in the midst of the baptized children of his own confessing Church members, but I didn't dare. "Come here, and sit on the front bench where you belong, at my feet," he shouted. And I got up and followed him and sat at his feet again. My gesture of rebellion was over. But the seed had been sowed and lay there.

September was lovely, full of bronzed sunlight and mild weather. Mother started worrying because she'd been barred from the Holy Communion services so long. One of these days she hoped she might be well enough to go to church just once to take Communion. But, she fretted, she had no decent clothes to wear for the occasion.

Getting her a presentable hat was no great problem. I helped her to rip up an old one and concoct something different from it, with a five-cent feather and ten cents' worth of velvet ribbon from the five-and-ten-cent store. But we didn't know what to do about a coat. She wasn't well enough to get up and try one on, even if there had been a store right across the street. Then in the newspaper we saw an advertisement of a sale of women's coats. They were remainders, priced extremely low, severely limited in styles and patterns. Also the store had a good Dutch name, even though it was at the other end of the city. The price, three dollars or even less, we felt we could afford. I was now as tall as Mother. Nothing would do but that I meet Father after work the next

day and together we'd go to this store with its bargain basement.

We found the store, we examined the coats. Most of them seemed too gaudy and too frivolous, especially to be worn to Holy Communion. Others were too large or too small, too flimsy or too heavy. Besides, Mother had given me final instructions to pick out something which could be worn both autumn and winter, especially since she could trim it for winter weather with a little black fur she'd brought with her from Holland.

The lackadaisical clerk hardly considered our patronage worth bothering with. Fortunately, there seemed to be no other customers in the dismal basement, so that we ignored his scornful staring while Father tried coat after coat on me. After a desperate search of ten minutes, just before the store closed for the day, we decided on a plain black model, somewhat too long to suit the current fashions, but very dignified. Besides, we argued, what was too long could be shortened, and this coat was so devoid of frills and furbelows that it certainly looked gravely handsome. We decided to purchase it and found that it was very cheap, so I picked out two small white plumes, a straight blue feather and some bluish net to add to Mother's hat.

Immensely satisfied, we trudged the three miles homeward through a driving rain, which had soaked us thoroughly before we reached our street. Naturally, the entire family was in a great state of excitement when Mother got up and tried on the coat. Her eyes fairly flashed when one of us suggested that perhaps we'd better not tell anyone that I had modelled for her coat. "Why not?" she cried. "In America men do women's work and women men's, and everybody does everything, I understand, so what could be more American?" The final upshot of it was, however, that she approved of the coat, mainly because it looked straight and dignified. Then, exhausted, she went back to bed again, to await the great Sunday on which she'd make her public appearance in her first American finery.

That Sunday came some weeks later, but we weren't allowed to show any joy or levity. It took Father so long to get Mother properly dressed that we three older boys had time to rush several blocks ahead, so that we could come walking sedately back and study her as nonchalantly as we possibly could while we approached her. Ah, but she did look marvellous, so completely American, such a lady, we decided enthusiastically, nudging each other, singing her praises under our breaths to each other, trying to ignore the fact that she looked terribly ill and that at any moment she was liable to collapse.

Our eyes saw clearly, but our mouths and hearts strove valiantly

to hide the knowledge that our eyes revealed. Our mother, who had been tall and lithe, elastic of step and golden of hair, now was hardly a wan ghost of her former self, in spite of her splendid new clothes. The spring had gone out of her, and where she had been willowy, she now looked merely limp and exhausted. The blue had faded from her eyes and had become a paler, wholly indistinguishable shade, and the hair which had been flawlessly golden now looked like grey-streaked hemp.

We looked from her to Father as they approached us together. We hadn't had any special occasion to watch him all these years, not even when he was in his Sunday best. But we saw that his step was no longer military, and his moustache was no longer defiantly stiff, and though his blue eyes were still as penetrating as they'd been before, they were full of pain and age. Now they hurt us because they reflected so much hurt and disappointment. He'd never been a tall, long-striding man, even though by American standards he was quite above the average in height; but now he was starting to look like a work-worn old man. Even *his aristocratic, aquiline nose now merely accentuated the deepening lines around his mouth and eyes.* But he's still dark, his hair is still black, I thought defiantly. Then we all fell into step behind our parents, and while our mouths praised Mother's splendour, our hearts lay heavy within us and grieved.

Of course, after attending that one service she had a relapse, and lay at the mercy of the doctor. He still hadn't made up his mind as to what malady or combination of maladies she was suffering from, but kept dosing her heavily with his opiates.

The next day I brushed Mother's new coat, filled the pockets with moth balls and hung it in the closet, from which I'd take it every week to examine it for moths. The new hat I put away in a box. The dreary winter was upon us again. Our rosy Dutch cheeks which had withstood the first American winter now grew pale, and American women no longer touched them. Neither did they think us as quaint and colourful as they had before.

In school I did much better, although I had little interest in it, because I had to stay home so frequently to take care of the house and the rest of the family. I was surprised when I received first prize for a map of Europe which I had drawn hastily, without even knowing that a prize was being competed for. I received a novel, a moral Christian novel, and because it had been presented to me by a Christian teacher from our Christian school, I was allowed by my parents to read it. I read my first novel in English, unmolested.

By this time I knew at least a hundred hymns in English, of

which "Throw Out the Lifeline," "Shall You, Shall I," "Bring Them In," and "Jesus is a Rock in the Weary Land—oh-uh the wea-eery land, the wea-ee-eery land"—seemed to lend themselves best to my own special kind of accompaniment on our little parlour organ. I had taught myself to play with four fingers, by a sort of home-made method which didn't jibe with the printed notes in the least. However, it did the job resoundingly, though with considerable wheezing, thudding and moaning from the organ. The faster the tempo of the hymns, the grimmer the pleas for salvation, the more hysterical the demands to throw out the lifeline, the more wildly my feet pumped, so that the old pedals were in constant need of repair. Mother was greatly pleased with my efforts, perhaps because the racket came to her somewhat dimly through her doped senses. But some neighbour boys, after watching me, declared solemnly that I played "dippy." It was a new word to me, and I translated it as meaning deeply and solemnly. I was greatly flattered and didn't become disillusioned till a year or so later.

Among the new female callers there was a finicky, snippy spinster, much given to argumentation on theological subjects. There was little she could argue about with our mother, so she started coming when Father was home. Then those two would argue about God's eternal mysteries for hours, often getting within a hair's breadth of actual animosity. She ignored us boys, except when she caught any of us saying "golly," or "dog-gone it," or "cripes," which she called swearing, and of which she said we must repent on bended knees.

In the course of one such admonition, she suddenly recalled a friend of hers. Doctrinally this friend was somewhat of an apostate, she said, and her faith was grossly emotional, but she was a fine nurse, and when she heard of Mother's plight, she would surely come rushing right over to help her. Then she resumed her argument with Father about supra- and infra-lapsarianism, and we took it for granted that her mention of this nurse had simply been inserted as a practical illustration to her arguments.

We were wrong, however. The very next morning, practically at dawn, a gaunt, homely woman presented herself at our door, and with excited voice and gestures declared that she'd come hurrying across town when she'd been told by her friend about our predicament. She was there to do good deeds; she was there as an angel of mercy. Her compassionate blue eyes took us all in; she would not be turned back.

There was never another like her. She took Mother in hand at

once; then she examined us and decided we needed good food, good care, and some extra mothering. She got a new doctor, she bought a new stove, she started baking bread and cakes and pies, she cooked amazing meals. She saw to it that we were bathed and fed and dressed properly. From the moment she set foot in the house she ruled everything with an iron hand of kindness and compassion. We were so amazed we couldn't do anything but submit. But we worshipped her. She was the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to us. She bluntly asked Father how much money he made, she looked at the bare house, and then she said that she was going to stay as one of the family, that she wanted no pay, and if feeding her cost too much, she would even pay for her own board.

Life changed so suddenly and spectacularly, that we didn't know how to accept it. Suddenly the house looked and smelled different, our stomachs were full of good food, and our mother seemed much brighter. Moreover the new doctor started diagnosing her ailments immediately, and the exciting job of getting her well was well advanced before we were really convinced that this was not a dream. Meanwhile, Nellie the nurse kept declaring vehemently that all this gave her more genuine delight than twenty picnics.

Evenings she would take us boys to the corner drugstore and watch us rapturously while we consumed the first ice-cream sodas we'd ever had. She sat there rubbing her long red nose, daubing at her excited, tearful blue eyes, urging us to eat more. She'd sally forth with us on shopping tours down town, and at amazingly reasonable prices fit us out with new pants, shirts, jackets, shoes; our first American clothes. Somewhat to our father's consternation, she also rushed us off to churches where people actually got together to do good to each other and to speak well of man as much as they did of God. Each time we returned, he warned us to armour ourselves against the false doctrines of such churches, even if they were preached in Dutch.

On the third day, after observing me trying to do the usual chores around the house, she ordered me to go out on the street and play. "But he's fourteen," Mother protested. "I don't think he even knows how to play any longer. Do you, David?"

"Fourteen, a mere child. He'd better start learning to play all over again, while there is still time," Nellie shouted.

For the first time in more than a year I went outside just to play. But I didn't know where to turn or how to start. I stood there and looked at the sky and the street and then down at myself. I didn't want to . . . I couldn't help it . . . But I felt the

tears coursing down my cheeks. At that moment I was only capable of vowing to myself that some day I'd become rich, and I'd erect a statue to Nellie in some park. . . . But for the time being I just stood crying in the street, and didn't know what else to do.

This, then, was love. This, then, was Christ's teaching put into practice. I was startled and then stunned by the realization. No wonder they had crucified Him, and now twisted His Commandments their own way. This love was almost too much to receive, let alone to give.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### PREPARING FOR BENIGHTED AMERICA

WE HAD REACHED THE depths; now we could start climbing up from the bottom of the heap. We had long ago forgotten our original, vague aims. New standards and new goals had been imposed on us by the people in whose midst we lived, with whom we worshipped, by whom we had been humiliated. Our horizons had become terribly circumscribed, but to reach beyond those horizons no opportunity, no strength and almost no imagination had been left us.

We children now spoke a recognizable sort of English. Father was at least being accepted as a good craftsman, and grudgingly paid an American wage. Thanks to Nellie and the therapeutic effect of her will power and enthusiasm, Mother was getting better. Only one unconquerable disease remained with her, a too long neglected case of diabetes. So finally came the day when Mother asked: "And now, when are we going back to Holland?"

Father said calmly: "We are not going back."

"I don't want to stay here where we've had nothing but grief, humiliation, poverty and suffering," she cried.

"That is why we are staying here," he answered. "Now that we have had all that, and only that, it's time to see what America can really offer us."

To my own surprise, I heard myself saying inwardly: Yes. And yet only a few weeks earlier I would have gone back to Holland with anyone willing to take me. What then had happened? It wasn't that our particular life in America and the opportunities it offered had become in any way acceptable to me. I consciously detested what I saw of it, and I certainly wanted to repudiate the



people in whose midst we lived. Yet obliquely, perhaps only emotionally, I wanted to echo Father's assertion: "So far we've only been kicked about. Now let us see what we can do by way of bettering ourselves and conquering what got us down."

Mother countered us by declaring that she on her part refused to see any of us become Americanized. If she had anything to say about it, she wasn't going to allow any supercilious Americanism to become part of us. Furthermore, she wasn't going to allow any of us to speak English in the house; neither were any American ways going to be introduced into the family to change its Dutch routine. Impotently we felt we had to agree with her, especially when we put ourselves in her place. We dared to say only among ourselves that her reasoning was suspiciously feminine. On the other hand, none of us had ever expressed any desire to become "American" in Mother's very limited conception of that term.

That conception of hers was based only on the people who lived close around us, those people of Dutch extraction who were so shamed of being Dutch, but who lacked the courage or imagination to become American. People who suspected and distrusted their country of adoption, who simply aimed at bettering themselves financially, while they kept stubbornly opposing all mental and really spiritual growth. They had their own limited goals: owning a little house with nice furniture, keeping that house clean and free of mortgages, conducting themselves safely and smugly, criticizing all people who didn't believe exactly as they did. Beneath a hard surface shell of religiosity, they were undeviatingly materialistic in a thousand petty ways.

No one had the right to offend them by acting, walking, living, dressing, speaking, wooing, marrying, singing, dying or even sinning in a way one iota different from their own. American sins such as going to movies and theatres, dancing, card-playing, novel reading were all to be assiduously avoided. On Sundays one couldn't go gadding about, or do any labour, or listen to light music; and at all times it was wrong to participate in competitive sports, unless you could do it to glorify God. And, of course, that was impossible. One could smoke—naturally only if one was a male—and still be conducting oneself in ways that God sanctioned. One could even conceivably drink a glass of beer if one didn't pay for it on Sunday—and become slightly more voluble in one's glorification of God. Drinking too much was another matter; the Bible explicitly forbade it. But to attend movies, to bob one's hair, to play old maid or pinoche, how could one do those and possibly glorify God thereby? Naturally, these people all indulged in gossiping, backbiting, cheating, all those

minor so human sins, those sins which merely involved man's inhumanity to man.

Those, then, were the so-called American standards we were now to aim for, standards set by people who had trodden upon us so long that we'd reached the bottom of their soggy heap of ideals. Unconsciously our aims were already being shaped accordingly. Of course, we were still unable to realize that it would have been much better for us if we'd never settled among these religious Dutch Americans. By now, however, we'd already been conditioned solely to worm and squirm our way toward a standard of living which was neither American nor Dutch, but one of the most stultifying hybrids possible.

After two years in America, we were at last deemed sufficiently worthy by our neighbours to enter into competition with them. It seemed that now, by some special dispensation from their materialistic, quasi-Calvinistic Deity, they could afford to give us a chance. Yet in their own inimitable way they also managed to convey that if we should try to do anything differently from them or better than they, we would immediately be put back in our proper place. Naturally, there were a few neighbours who were not as bad as this. Some people can't help but show that they're human, even under the worst circumstances. Some even knew how to do good deeds consciously.

At about this time, a presumably disinterested woman came to advise Father that instead of renting a house at nine dollars a month, we could buy one and pay her off at the rate of ten a month, if she supplied the principal. Of course, also, if we traded at her store, behaved ourselves, and didn't fall behind in our payments.

Even our guardian angel Nellie decided that this was the right thing to do, and offered her help. And so it came to pass that we acquired a solid little house. We had taken our first material step toward becoming real Dutch Americans—clean folks, as the patronizing local newspapers invariably called us, thrifty, hard-working, sober, non-rebellious—believing strictly in the *status quo*, the Republican Party, and in ourselves as the special children of God.

Our new home was in the next alley, and that, too, was a step in the right direction. It was an unspectacular but solid little house, with a thick privet hedge, an inside toilet, and a dry cellar. To get there, we carried our few belongings across a neighbour's yard and three houses down the next street. Once moved in, we started singing praises in our own way at the wheezy old organ, and made plans for a still more solid future.

Life had opened its little hencoop door and bade us to step in and behave ourselves. We were nicely on our way to becoming "humbly proud" American citizens.

Already our neighbours considered me proud, because I was silent, shy, and self-contained. Whatever confidence I had had was atrophied by now. In Holland I had been somewhat of a leader; here I only wanted to be left alone. There was no exciting goal in sight, anyway. Some day I might be worthy enough to hold down a job, marry a girl of the right faith, raise a safe family in a neat little house, and then die in the faith.

As soon as we moved into the new house our way of life became even more routine. Mother was now well enough to be up, and Nellie had left us to cope with more dire emergencies in other people's homes. My brief period of freedom had ended. Also Mother immediately demanded that we conduct ourselves according to her vow: there was to be nothing but Dutch behaviour, manners, speech, even methods and times of eating.

In spite of her resolve that no American customs were going to be introduced into our house, Mother couldn't help being seduced by American methods of baking, canning and preserving. Those were so economical! Usually she scorned English recipes, however, and forced us to make translations of them, to which she added her own variations, perhaps out of sheer defiance. Sometimes these translations led to rather peculiar results. Once she was about to make a cake which called for shortening. My dictionary didn't help me, but I privately decided that shortening referred to something small, hence short, something broken, or crumbled. Bravely I translated: "Three tablespoons of crumbs."

"That's just a silly American notion," she announced in her typical way. "I won't put them in. I think it's much better to add three spoonfuls of fat. No wonder Americans are so pale." So in spite of my translation, the cake turned out well after all, and American ways had suffered another setback in my mother's estimation.

At about this time our imaginative and violent minister left us. Shepherdless we wandered for a few weeks, but then a new man of the cloth heeded our call. This one would weep copiously at the mere mention of Jesus's wounds, love and beauty. It was a great change, but not the only one. After much argument pro and con, the church fathers settled the moot question of introducing English services. Henceforth each Sunday our church would conduct two services in Dutch and two in English.

This caused a new situation which was hard upon us children. Mother with her resolve to keep us as Dutch as possible, and

Father with his insistence that we should prove ourselves superior to the ordinary believers, together came to a new decision. We boys were to attend all four services, the two Dutch ones as well as the two English, even though the English ones were frequently simply translated repetitions of the Dutch. We were going to show our petty little world what stuff we were made of.

Naturally, we children were expected to obey. So to church we marched each Sunday morning early with our parents to attend the Dutch service lasting approximately two hours. Then when our parents went home, and we'd taken a five-minute breathing spell, we filed into church again for the equally long English service. After the English service, my brothers would stay seated for Sunday school, which lasted another hour, while I hurried home to help put the dinner on the table. After dinner we had perhaps an hour's respite, and off we'd go again to the afternoon Dutch service. Then home for a cold supper, and by six-thirty we'd be *en route* (just we children of course; our parents had the good excuse that they couldn't understand a word of English) to the evening service again. After that session, there was frequently a special mission meeting we had to attend, or we'd march to the county jail, or to special chapels in "unenlightened districts" to sing hymns to prisoners and the "spiritually unawakened." By midnight our Sunday would be over.

Of course, we realized that we were being driven harder along the road to piety than any other children. We complained a little, but to no avail. In their own way our parents were going to prove to our neighbours that we could and dared to be superior to them. Naturally we boys were merely the victims of their resolution. It's a wonder we didn't acquire triple personalities and multiple eccentricities. Perhaps we did, but who was there to tell us, or to help us?

So I sailed righteously toward my fifteenth birthday. I was now unfailingly silent, shy and sedate, not even allowing myself any possible means of escape, because I saw nothing in America I cared to escape to. At school I soon found myself in the eighth grade, in the principal's room. I learned easily, and someone had discovered that I could draw better than any of the teachers, so that I was allowed to do complicated landscapes and figures on the blackboards of every room in school. I needed the adulation I received; it was about the first and only praise I'd ever got in America and it gave me back a very slight portion of my self-respect. One evening at home I declared that I wanted to become a draftsman, but I was told succinctly that that was a worldly ambition, and I had better repent immediately.

And so I kept being unhappy, and found no goal toward which I could direct my energies. God was much on my mind, and the consciousness of sin always weighed upon me. I wanted a friend, but there seemed to be no one who wanted to be that to me.

## CHAPTER XXX

### THE LITTLE PLACES

SINCE COMING FROM HOLLAND, we had now lived in all three of the crowded little places: Freylong Place, Donald Place, and Robey Place, where practically everyone was Dutch. "Of Dutch extraction" the younger generation would correct you severely, refusing to be classified with their soberly clad, work-worn fathers, mothers, and grandparents.

You were "Americans of Dutch extraction" when you conducted your conversations by shouting from one skimpy sidewalk to the other in strongly accented English heavily laden with Dutch idioms. Your old folks would frequently remain stubbornly Dutch, much to your embarrassment. Everybody knew all about everybody else, and you were shouted about without mercy. If any girl on the street had "lost her reputation" last Sunday night on her little front porch, everybody knew it by Monday. When Sadie K. had another baby, you knew it from her good old-fashioned wails, audible over all the three little "places." When middle-aged Jennie Polderzwaak had a new beau, one who squinted and was a little feeble mentally, everybody sat in judgment on his little porch, behind his little vine. You knew who was "going steady" with whom; which young fellow had got off to a bad start in life because he had been seen with an American or even a Polish girl, or coming from a Sunday baseball game, or, worst of all, emerging from a poolroom. Talk of the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah was on your lips. The modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah were, of course, the movie houses, those "sin parlours" in which you yourself had never been, and which you knew no wholesome person ever entered.

One woman explained to Mother about the evils of movie houses: "Naturally, my dear woman, I wouldn't even walk on the sidewalk in front of those places, and of course I've never set foot in them, but I do know that men and women go in there together, and as soon as they are inside, the lights are turned off promptly, and you can just imagine what goes on between them and every-

body else, as they stay there in darkness and wickedness for two whole hours."

You were trying terribly hard not to be Dutch. But you were suspicious of the old Yankee woman who lived in a ramshackled house at the dead end of Robey Place, and who smoked a corn-cob pipe, raised house plants in tin cans, and was never known to have any washing on her line. Or of the old Irish couple in Donald Place, who twice a month lugged their mattresses outdoors to "air out" the bedbugs. They minded their own business, but you knew that anyone living with bedbugs and acting frivolously on Sundays and bearing such unwholesome names as Clara-Belle—as the old man actually called his wife—must also be transgressors of all the Commandments, either directly or by default or proxy. And you were convinced that the gaunt Swedish woman in Freyling Place who kept boarders, but who also read Sunday newspapers and rode on the street-car on Sunday, could be no less than a whore who lived in sin with all her boarders, even though she was gaunt, withered and wholly undesirable.

There you lived in the crowded little places—of which there were numerous replicas all over town, all jammed in together, sanctimonious, clean, noisy, and fanatically respectable. And night and day, from January first to December thirty-first, you watched over your neighbours to see that they kept their paths humble, straight and clean. Or else!

Of course, there were different categories among you. About fifty per cent of you belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church, the other fifty per cent to the reputedly more pure Christian Reformed Church, which had separated from the former when it found its doctrines and discipline too lax. Naturally, you were all guided by the same precepts, as set forth in God's Word and the Heidelberg Catechism, and you subscribed to the same general moral code. But frequently the children of the Reformed Church would attend baseball games or other worldly shindigs more openly than those of the Christian Reformed; their daughters would start bobbing their hair a few weeks sooner, setting a loose example to follow; their sons might openly amuse themselves with card games like rook and old maid. Naturally the greatest distinction of all was that Christian Reformed children were sent to the denominational Christian schools, while those of the Reformed believers were exposed to the dangerous teachings of the public schools.

In general, however, wittingly or unwittingly, you were constantly offending your neighbours or being offended by them, and you either repented or were chastised. Communion with the

saints wasn't in the least easy, or pleasant or conducive to any growth or development except in one prescribed direction.

Needless to say, this wasn't the rather free, robust and somewhat haphazard life we had been used to in Holland. America, however, was a far more civilized and enlightened country than Holland. It was simply stupid and Dutch not to appreciate this, and above all one should jealously guard oneself against being "Dutch."

Along our little street there was much rivalry among the different families to prove how non-Dutch they were. Many howed their non-Dutchness by mopping their floors daily, not on hands and knees, but with a newfangled mop on a stick. Others would scrub their front stoops only on alternate days instead of daily. Some did away with the afternoon tea hour, or the morning coffee session, because those were so Dutch. Parlour organs were Dutch, too, and it was much better to wail, "Someone shall enter the pearly gate, bye and bye, shall you, shall I?" to the accompaniment of a piano. Naturally, the better element tripped off to the English services in church; only the obtuse old Dutchmen plodded off to the Dutch services, thus hindering "progress." It was being non-Dutch and therefore meritorious, to buy your new furniture on the instalment plan, to aspire to owning a Ford, to sing with a fancy trill in your voice, not to shake hands with your host or hostess when you entered their house—wasn't this a free democracy?—to read the comics in the daily papers, to leave the house by the front door instead of the back, to shun eating Leiden or Gouda cheese, to wear round patches on your pants instead of square Dutch patches, never to read or speak or admit that you understood one word of the abominable, lowly Dutch language, even though your poor old stubborn mother might have all the walls of the house hung with Dutch mottoes and Bible texts, and might turn away every salesman that came to the door by whispering guiltily; "No spreek Engels."

When you reached the age of discretion you started to understand the awful, awful stigma of being Dutch. You had to guard and fight against it daily, while you continued being scrubbed fanatically clean, beset by infinitely petty ambitions, racked by thousands of misgivings, subject to floods of condemnation. This was your life, and you'd better not open your eyes too wide and see its limitations, because then you were being supercilious. Your neighbours, your church, and your school knew what was good for you. Already you were very fortunate to be living in Grand Rapids, that new Jerusalem, with its fifty-odd churches of the true faith, where you could keep safely segregated from all the wiles

of the world. It wasn't healthy to question established antecedents, nor to seek out the furthestmost boundaries of life. One should keep hugging the safe, dead centre.

How much of all this did I realize, now that I was approaching fifteen? Consciously perhaps I realized very little; it was only when I was in a rebellious mood that I felt it considerably more. But there was no way out, financially, intellectually or morally. With my parents trying to show us children off as the best behaved, best trained, most obedient and uncorruptible in the street, it was no wonder that mere happiness seemed held in abeyance from us. I felt that I had put aside happiness in Holland. In fact, it was even sinful to think of happiness as anything that could be found outside of Christ.

Yet America itself, that world of sin, beguilement and excitement, kept drawing closer, I could still look upon the young people in our street and consider myself purer and better than they when I saw them playing baseball and such forbidden games, but often now I watched them wistfully. And now I was going on for fifteen, and at that age boys—in spite of their own most earnest intentions to the contrary—started looking at girls, and I knew that everybody in the street would now watch my conduct even more closely than before. It disturbed me, because I didn't know which of the three general classes of girls I dared or had the right to look at. Certainly not those who had already "lost their reputations" by spooning openly on their front porches. Nor those who by their very swagger, their plainly revealed ankles, their high heels and hair, would put themselves soon enough beyond the pale of respectability. There remained only those unexciting, stodgy, bland and mild ones, who looked at boys only when matrimony was the prize, a safe five or ten years in the future. Of course, there were also those ubiquitous dream girls, not from the world of sanity, not even Dutch, who kept slipping through the portals of your mind. And then, when you recognized your own unworthy thoughts, you realized that you'd simply left your defences down and allowed a clandestine visit of the devil.

In our jealously guarded street, there was little chance for actual sin. As a result, your poor imagination worked feverishly, and it became all the more important to hide even your most simple thoughts from your neighbours. Neighbours who would have been jealous had they known that you could sin more satisfactorily in your innermost thoughts than they could. They now had to expend their jealousy on mere external manifestations, largely pertaining to their little houses. If one family, for instance, painted its house, the neighbours sat in judgment, condemned the



deed, and then painted their houses the same colour the next season. If one installed electric lights, others, while still loudly proclaiming their indignation, would secretly rush to cheaper and more distant electricians to have their houses appraised.

Not infrequently this would lead to laughable extremes. When one sixteen-year-old girl bought herself a bright orange hat from Kresge's dollar store, all the other fifteen, sixteen and seventeen-year-olds rushed downtown to buy a similar hat, whether it became their freckled, cross-eyed, pimpled, pinched, or sallow faces or not. So we had orgies of hair bobbings, skirt shortenings, house-roofings, even of tonsil removings.

Still, the few times that I lapsed into actual sin, my conscience made me suffer terribly. One Sunday I put a penny in a slot machine for chewing gum. Three minutes later the gum tasted like the very excrement of hell to me. One spring Sunday my brother and I skipped just one of the four church services to go look at the newly budding trees and singing birds instead. I didn't enjoy it, because I felt Satan stalking behind me as if on tennis shoes. I stole a red balloon from the five-and-dime on a sudden impulse, when a high wind seemed to indicate that I should sail a red balloon upon it. The balloon went straight up to God, bearing my sins, which would be read back to me on the great Judgment Day.

No, I never fell from grace so deeply as to enter a movie house, touch a deck of cards, or even take one dancing step—in spite of the Biblical example of King David dancing before the Ark—or to take the name of the Lord consciously in vain. But my sins of omission started worrying me more than those of commission. In a twenty-four-hour day so much could be omitted that should have been committed in the course of progress toward sanctification.

Then suddenly I fell into evil. Greater evil than perhaps seventy-five per cent of the inhabitants of Robey Place had ever fallen into. I went to a circus. I didn't fight the temptation at all; perhaps I would have if the tickets hadn't been given free to Rem and me. To have been faced with the necessity of paying out good money for a sinful purpose would certainly have drawn me up short. As it was, however, I fell ingloriously.

For some time Rem had been working for one of those impractical Americans whose special folly it was to breed fancy dogs and even fancier cats. Sometimes I helped him, and one evening while we were scrubbing and disinfecting the cat house, the owner presented us with the tickets to the circus. What to do with those charming but evil pieces of cardboard? Keeping our consciences

and God at a safe distance, we two at once started hatching a plan for going to the circus. The following evening, we convinced our parents that we had to go back to put the finishing touches to the Pekes, Pomeranians, Persian and Siamese cats, who supposedly were all going through their seasonal deworming. The job might take till eleven o'clock, we warned them.

Our plan wasn't exactly the best, because Mother made us wear our oldest and dirtiest clothes. Besides, somehow or other we'd have to squeeze in some extra job, in order to be able to hand our parents the money we had supposedly earned at the rich American's kennels. We hurried the several miles to the circus grounds on foot, with our hearts in our throats, fully convinced that we'd find the entrance blocked by a whole army of ministers and deacons from our church, posted there to snatch any erring young ones from evil. When we reached the entrance, we slipped in separately, wedging ourselves between the heftiest people we could find. We stealthily rejoined each other in front of a somewhat malodorous lion in a cage, who looked at us so suspiciously that we wouldn't have been surprised in the least if he had discarded his lion skin and revealed himself as a forbidding preacher.

But soon we became so excited that we lost all our trepidation, and even all realization of wrong. We enjoyed the circus practically in a state of frenzy, because we couldn't watch everything at once. All through the performance we kept changing places, falling between the seats and colliding with suspicious attendants so often that it was a wonder we weren't ushered out. Suddenly we found that it was ten o'clock by dint of peering at the golden watch of a gentleman next to us. He didn't seem to like the proximity of our overalled selves to him at all, and got even more suspicious when we started running after we'd looked at his watch. But to us ten o'clock was a portentous hour, the hour when we must rid ourselves of all evil and hurry home lest the roof of the world collapse upon our heads.

Somehow in our haste and excitement, we took the wrong way out and landed among the circus wagons, where we gazed with awe upon freaks, clowns, and ladies in pink tights. Suddenly I recalled that these people might be gipsies and that we were in imminent danger of being kidnapped by them. We fled across the muddy fields—it had started to rain—and practically fell into the arms of a very ferocious acting cop, who reminded us that the curfew had sounded hours ago. In the end, however, he gave us the necessary directions to find Wealthy Street, perhaps because our humility and obvious sense of guilt convinced him that we were no ordinary miscreants.

Wearied and dripping like fountains, we turned at last into Robey Place, convinced that we'd find our house filled with elders, deacons, ministers and righteous neighbours who had discovered our defection. The lights were still on, and through the window we saw Father and Mother waiting for us, though the little Dutch clock behind them said eleven-twenty. For a while we stood beneath the window listening for any remark which might suggest that we had been found out. None came, and so with countenances which we imagined to be fairly overlaid with scarlet sin, we entered the house and gave a feverish account of our dog and cat deworming activities of the evening. Then with a sense of guilt like a mountain upon me, I marched off to bed.

Rem soon fell asleep, but I lay there, fully expecting God to strike me with palsy, or scarlet fever, or leprosy, or certainly with lightning before the night was over. At last I, too, fell into undeserved sleep. Neither did I see any ravages of sin upon my freckled face the next morning when I gazed anxiously at my countenance in the little flawed ten-cent mirror. Certainly, I would have to cleanse myself from this sin by confessing first to God, then to my parents, then to the Church.

I did none of these except the first, and knew that by my omission I was making myself a whited sepulchre, filled with crumbling and stinking bones of death. Oddly enough, in the process I'd also become somewhat more American, I realized.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### OH, TAKE HIS HAND

IT WAS JUNE, and our class was getting ready to graduate in an inspiring and exemplary fashion. There were eleven of us eighth grade pupils, six boys and five girls. We were the sons and daughters of house-painters, janitors, carpenters, factory workers, day labourers, storekeepers. We might have been described as the progeny of the *lumpen* proletariat. But we knew we were respectable Christian Dutch Americans, upon whom the cares of the world and of God's kingdom would soon start weighing more heavily. We were God's own elect. Of course, we had our own peculiar pride and ambitions.

Our principal had started coaching us in our graduation song, which we'd sing in the course of the exercises at the Dennis

Avenue Christian Reformed Church. It was going to be a weighty occasion, a milestone in our lives. We were admonished to keep our ideals high, our minds pure. The world would open its arms wide, and with the help of God we'd simply walk into those outstretched arms and conquer all before us.

Some of us might become preachers, some Christian school-teachers, yea verily, perhaps even professors at Calvin College. Even though our financial state might be precarious, God had wrought wonders before. Beyond those earthly goals, however, there were still higher and more celestial goals which we could in no wise reach unaided. All this our principal told us when she read us the words of our class song.

*Take His hand and He will lead you,  
O'er life's dark and lonely way;  
Take His hand and He will give you  
In the end eternal day.*

*Oh, take His hand, His strong, true hand,  
And cling to it forever more—Forever More.  
He will always keep thee near Him  
Till life's journey all is o'er.*

The words of our song notwithstanding, few of us really believed that we were about to set foot upon a dark and lonely road, leading through a vale of tears. But it was a solemn song, and we were going to render it impressively, as our principal and God desired we should do.

She ran into difficulties with us, however: technical, emotional and biological. None of us were tiptop vocalists. The boys outnumbered the girls in strength and volume, and that would never do. In this budding American civilization which our class represented, girls should never take back seats to boys. Girls were prettier, sweeter, more ornamental, and certainly more to the principal's taste. Neither had they been so faultily constructed that their voices might start cracking in the middle when they reached a certain awkward and slightly indelicate age.

Therein lay the chief trouble with us boys. Three of us were in our fifteenth year or older. Something besides sheer uncouthness had come into our bearing, something perhaps a little unsavoury and to be suspected. Here were three voices that halfway through the second line might plummet from garden-party soprano down to barnyard bass. Something had to be done about it. One of us, hopelessly in the bass stage, was ordered to keep his rumblings as

inaudible as possible. Humming would suffice him. We two others were advised to try falsetto when we felt anything unseemly happening to our vocal chords, or better still, to resort to complete silence. However, we were told to keep on moving our lips in unison with the others so as to conceal our defection from the audience. The three still unaffected boys were to carry the burden of male vocalizing. The girls seemed duly conscious of their own infallibility. So we practised, grimly, faultily, sometimes grievously, but in the end we achieved something bearable, especially when heard from a safe distance.

Then a new problem arose. We boys had been asked to wear stiff collars to the ceremonies, but now there was some doubt as to how those collars would react upon our already temperamental vocal chords. As a result, we three older boys were advised to wear soft collars, starched just enough to give them a semblance of austerity. The scarlet ties we were to wear with those collars probably wouldn't give us any great trouble, as they were beneath our chins, where they could hardly affect us. At our age, however, it seemed as if almost anything could set us afire.

We boys were also advised to get ourselves new blue serge suits. The girls were going to wear white dresses, all cut after the same pattern. We were going to be initiated into our new lives, neatly, formally and uniformly. It seemed, however, that I was the only fly in the ointment. I couldn't afford a new suit; my first American suit, which I'd bought for four dollars, would have to do for this occasion. Unfortunately it was grey. I was sure that my lone appearance in grey would bar me from the valedictorianship, which perhaps might otherwise be mine. On the other hand, my Dutch accent, my awkwardness, and my shyness might already have made me ineligible for that honour. Girls could conduct themselves so much more daintily in such capacities, and our principal for a long time had her eye on one bright representative of the female sex, whose hair was always neatly curled and whose family was much more impressive than mine.

Only a few months ago, I had coveted the honour, and would have been anxious to contend for it. During the last semester, however, I'd been constantly assailed by a feeling of unworthiness and inferiority. Dutch American standards were beginning to get me down. I intentionally hid any light I had under the proverbial bushel basket, and tried to make myself as inconspicuous and ordinary as possible. On top of that, something more tangible had happened to me. For the last few weeks I had been in mental agony every time I had to recite before the class, and that in spite of the fact that only a few years ago, I had thought nothing of

getting up before an audience of a thousand and singing or reciting to them.

The fact that I was going to be the only inharmonious note of grey in our navy-blue ensemble humbled me even more. The girls in my class seemed to take it as a personal insult to them. One of them, a hefty redhead, told me in no uncertain terms that I'd always been a good-for-nothing weak-kneed Dutchie, anyway. It hurt and angered me unreasonably for many days. My feeling of unworthiness increased so much that in the end I was really surprised that I would even be allowed to graduate with the rest, let alone to make a public appearance with them.

Then once more I was obliged to fail the class. Our principal, with a bright expectant smile on her face, asked all of us who planned to go to high school the next September to raise our hands. Again I was the only exception, and when the principal's smile flickered out, I realized that once more I had betrayed the ideals and ambitions of the class. Personally, I doubted that more than half of the class could afford to be sent to high school. Moreover, it seemed that the mere fact that I couldn't even afford a new suit should have been obvious proof that I couldn't keep on going to school. I didn't see why the entire class should feel insulted; certainly I had no reasons whatsoever to be as optimistic as they were. Evidently I wasn't showing the right class spirit, something which I had always been deficient in.

To save everybody from further embarrassment, the principal ordered us to the piano again, and each one in his peculiar voice launched into the now so familiar:

*Oh take His hand, His strong true hand,  
And cling to it forever more—Forever More . . .*

This time, however, I couldn't sing. Whatever voice I had had before simply had disappeared. I couldn't even open and close my lips in unison with the others. I simply had no faith, no courage, no hope, no spirit left for singing.

When I came home, I told my parents what had happened. Mother answered that, of course, if I felt the divine call to become a preacher, she and Father would be willing to sacrifice themselves to the utmost degree so that I might keep on going to school. But I felt no divine call, not even a strongly human one. Father promised, however, that he would go and speak to our principal about my future.

When the time for graduation came, however, I ostensibly was still the only member doomed to a workaday life, to struggle, toil and trouble. All the others were going to become learned and

important. While they worked in neat offices, or taught in noble schools, or counted money in pillared banks, I would go trudging to a factory with my dinner pail, while a whole brood of my undernourished children would be left behind in my humble home till I'd earned enough to feed them. Naturally, I couldn't foresee then that I was going to be the only member of the class who not only finished high school, but also college and even more. I wouldn't have believed the vision even if it had been presented to me by our most pious preacher.

What then was there for me to do but sing in falsetto:

*Oh take His hand, His strong true hand,  
And cling to it forever more—Forever More . . .*

To hear the unconquerable bass grumble beside me:

*He will always keep thee near Him,  
Till life's journey all is o'er.*

The trouble was, life's journey wouldn't be over for many and many a year. And starting out on it in an old grey suit and ten-cent scarlet tie, and with no hope of any further schooling, put me at a decided disadvantage.

Before the great day came, our class decided to have a picnic. If I went, it would be the only time I'd got together with my classmates outside of school. Even now I got up before dawn to sprinkle and cut people's grass, and worked every night after school till dark. This day, however, I was determined to join my classmates beneath God's own June skies, to enjoy potato salad and cake, and perhaps some rowing on the lake. But I didn't really quite know how to conduct myself, how to participate in this sudden fraternity proffered me. I had always been fairly friendly with one or two of the boys across the aisles in school, and the class as a whole wasn't unkindly disposed toward me. However, I simply wasn't used to their out-of-school actions or conversation. When I was actually allowed to sit in one of the row-boats as a mere passenger, I felt shyly grateful, and even humbly embarrassed when one of the boys who was rowing nudged the other and said: "Hey, look at Dave, lookit the way he likes it and is scared, too."

On the evening of the graduation exercises I marched alone to the church in my old grey suit, which was getting rather too tight and small for me, especially since it had been cleaned. I had been casually designated as the class salutatorian, which ordinarily would have meant that I would have given some sort of inspirational speech as the second best scholar in the class. In my case,

however, that honour was waived; or rather, it was never even mentioned. Gratefully I reminded myself that I wouldn't have to do anything more terrible now than to get up on the platform with the others, sing our class song, and then be handed a beribboned diploma.

Then, just as I reached the church and was going to slip into the basement to join the others and have two carnations and our class ribbons pinned on me, something happened. On the basement steps I was stopped by three older boys, who had graduated from our school two years previously, and whom I only knew slightly. Though none of them had ever harmed me before, I figured that they could have nothing but that in mind when they started cornering me just inside the door. Then the one whose truculent actions I feared most demanded gruffly: "Now look here, Dave, are you gonna let them do it to you? Let that pretty little girl be the valedictorian instead of you? Why, guy, stay away. Tell 'em you're pissin' on the whole crew. . . ." The other two seconded him, even as I stammered out something about my own unworthiness, and started shaking my head stubbornly. At that they only became more impatient and angry with me. I wanted to shout out my gratitude to them, because they were concerned over me out of sheer friendliness, certainly not because they had anything to gain by it. But this was so completely the opposite of what I was accustomed to that I could only wrench myself away from them and hurry down those basement steps before my emotion overcame me.

Even so they did me more good than all the other pupils combined had done for years. Somehow the graduation exercises didn't matter to me any more. Neither did I feel rebellious, I simply felt comforted and triumphant, and stronger and harder too. I wanted to find those three fellows again, and explain. . . . But I knew I'd be too shy to do anything, let alone to express my gratitude.

The next day our class was going to have its graduation picture taken downtown. I had got up that morning at four to sprinkle lawns, in spite of the toothache which had swollen my left jaw out of all recognizable proportions. I had carried my grey suit to work with me, and when ten o'clock came I changed clothes in someone's garage, and started running toward the photographer's. It was only when I'd reached downtown, that I realized I'd left my diploma and carnations at home. I found the others waiting for me, and naturally I was called stupid because I'd come unprepared. But the photographer coped with the situation very nicely; he placed me in the farthest corner of the group, gave me



a rolled photograph for a diploma and put an artificial flower in my lapel. And so I still stand in the photograph, with my face swollen and lopsided, and with my entire countenance seeming to apologize for being there when I was hardly worthy of it.

A few minutes later I was hurrying back to my job again, and was once more in my old corduroys and work shirt by the time my classmates were sitting down to ice-cream sodas for a little farewell celebration.

All that summer I worked as hard as I possibly could, from before dawn till after dusk every day, still hoping that I might earn enough to be sent to high school in September. Sometimes I managed to make as much as fourteen dollars a week, an enormous amount in my opinion. I kept a careful record of my earnings, even though they were immediately taken over by the family, and I received only a dime a week for spending money.

Soon I had so much work cutting and sprinkling grass that my younger brother Meindert became my assistant. Characteristically, he couldn't possibly see any reason why I should work so long and hard, especially since the family took almost every cent I earned. He tried to prove to me that as far as my own ends were concerned, I had nothing to lose in allowing myself much more leisure and pleasure. He himself could be kept working steadily for only two hours at a stretch; then he'd stage his own peculiar version of a sit-down strike, and I would have to give him a nickel so that he could go to the corner candy store for some ice-cream. He was ruining himself with such extravagant American ways, I would protest impotently. Before long he took another more drastic step; he would refuse to do another stroke of work until I personally laid off work too and accompanied him to the ice-cream parlour to refresh myself with a soda too.

He was raising havoc with all my anxious ambitions, but I could do very little about it. In the end I compromised by going with him to the candy store once a day. There I arranged with the Greek proprietor that he should serve us only small five-cent sodas. I explained to him that even though my ten-year-old brother might be a spendthrift, I was as poor and hard-working a mortal as he was himself in his own Greek way.

Meindert, however, was not yet done with me. He intensified his campaign of trying to corrupt me with loose and wasteful habits. One day he unearthed in some rich American's garage a stack of old magazines which had a long serial by James Oliver Curwood in them. Now he insisted that I should take off an hour each afternoon to read the serial, and blandly threatened me with complete mutiny if I didn't. And so it came to pass that for

the first time in my life, even though with anxious and guilty feelings, I found myself reading genuine, unhallowed, uncalvinistic American fiction, stuff that had no palpable moral or religious purpose. Instead it was filled with exciting females who insisted on swimming naked in dark cool pools in northern woods, while the villain leered through pine and juniper branches, and where subsequently a faithful collic would leap at his throat, or some wholesome hero would lay him out neatly with a perfect left hook. . . . Oh, I couldn't help but realize that this was wonderful; in fact, it was terrific. Meindert, the tempter, saw to it that I kept reading. Then one afternoon I forgot work altogether and was still reading when the sun slipped behind the houses. In consternation I jumped up; precious hours, nickels and dimes had been irrevocably lost, the possibility of my attending high school had been set back by so many pennies' worth. Of course, Meindert merely laughed at my concern. Something would happen, he predicted, that would rectify everything again. In fact, according to his ideas on life, something always did.

True enough, that night there came abundant rains, relieving me of many days of sprinkling, for which I'd get paid just the same. But my lapse from conscientiousness had shaken me to my very foundations. The next day I sold the old magazines to a junk dealer, soothing Meindert's ruffled feelings by giving him the money I received for them. Never in my life did I read James Oliver Curwood again, but already he had affected me tremendously. I now wanted to become an American with enough money, time, leisure and lack of conscience to sit down any old time and read such stories in such magazines, that is, if I could keep my eternal soul intact in spite of it.

For the present, however, I immediately had to start coping again with my workaday present and my very uncertain future.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### PITFALLS OF YOUTH

AMERICA WAS CROWDING closer. I started working in a drugstore. A drugstore which, further more, was on the fringes of the downtown district, in the midst of a conglomeration of boarding and rooming houses, Irish Catholics and Syrians, temples of strange cults and spiritualistic parlours. My new

employer, Mr. Baxter, was a benign old man with a flowing white beard and long white hair which he kept imprisoned beneath a black skullcap. He belonged to a sect called the Flying Rollers, and he immediately started gently and patiently trying to convert me.

My more pressing problems for the time being were settled. My new employer had taken me on face value, no doubt because the mere pittance he could pay was acceptable to me. I looked clean and intelligent, he said, and I doubted that I really was. Moreover, he didn't seem to have any objection to my being Dutch, speaking with a Dutch brogue, conducting myself in a Dutch manner, and wearing shabby clothes.

He was only somewhat amazed when I stated firmly that I couldn't work on Sunday because it was the Lord's Day. After that he tried every day to prove to me that according to the infallible Flying Roll every day was a day of the Lord—in fact, every hour and every minute. I was willing to have him preach to me, as long as I felt myself to be a staunch unyielding Calvinist. Furthermore, while I stood listening to him, I didn't have to work, and I figured that the more interest I showed, the sooner he might give me a raise.

The thing that Mr. Baxter took most seriously after his strange religion was the remedies he made and sold himself: Baxter's Cough Syrup, Baxter's Pimple and Blackhead Cream, and Baxter's Corn Plasters. I was perfectly willing to put his infallible remedies to the test, and perhaps expressed somewhat more faith in them than in his creeds. Naturally, I soon learned to recommend those remedies especially to our customers. Mr. Baxter thereupon beamed on me, and told me I was a wise and noble youth.

The hours were very long, the work reasonably hard but varied and a liberal education in itself. Here I waited on people who seemed to have no idea of looking down on me, who graciously allowed me to serve them, and who even made small talk with me without shrinking away from my brogue. Most of them, by their actions or own confession, proved to be either Roman Catholics or absolutely nothing at all. In any case they didn't seem to concern themselves in the least with my beliefs, nor did they put on any sanctimoniousness with which to keep me in my proper place. Within a few weeks, my entire conception of the American world had been radically changed. I was gathering unto myself a very unhealthy faith in humanity, and felt somewhat less called upon to keep myself separated from "the World" as represented by these people.

Naturally, new temptations soon presented themselves, but these, I felt, I could easily deal with. After all I was protected by a stern religious faith, an almost airtight ignorance about the ways of men, and an innocence that was blind, inarticulate and genuine.

I'd reach the store at a quarter of seven each morning, after a two-mile walk. First I swept and dusted before the early customers arrived, after which I'd simply keep going, alternating between the soda fountain and the rest of the store. Apart from the general work, there was always something to be scoured, polished, washed, concocted or delivered. Never need I have one idle moment, Mr. Baxter kept exhorting me, no matter how small my pay. Even though I often worked until eleven o'clock at night, I was delighted with myself and this newly opened world.

In the beginning to took all my courage to wait on customers. I much preferred washing out showcases, mopping floors and trimming windows. These American customers seemed so disconcertingly casual in some respects, so unnecessarily circumscribed in others. Soon, however, I was left alone in the store for hours, and I was forced to wait on all and sundry who wanted my services. Soon, too, I found myself frequently embarrassed to inarticulateness when certain customers—usually men—would beckon me to the back of the store and with stage whispers and furtive gestures let it be known that they were interested in certain preventives and prophylactics. These I learned soon enough, were wholly dedicated to lustful practices—or, as our new preacher would say in his English services, “to grievous sins and fornications instigated by the whore of Babylon herself.” Usually I'd refer such customers to Mr. Baxter, but occasionally I'd feel my moral duty so earnestly that I'd tell them that we didn't trade in such goods. In case Mr. Baxter should question my actions, I could always claim that it was extremely hard for me to learn from the customers' embarrassed phrases and gesture just exactly what article was in demand. There were a score of florid and completely illogical names for one common article that was strictly dedicated to shenanigans with sin, and I didn't intend to be any sort of abettor of such behaviour, even only as a middle-man.

There was no doubt about it, the American world was a sinful one. What was even worse, sin was taken very casually, so that even the most flagrant practitioners of it could remain on friendly and easy-going terms with me. On the other hand, the errors I made didn't seem to lower me in their estimation. If anything, they were liable to treat them as jokes on themselves, so that

soon I got the reputation of being somewhat of a comic fellow, which to me, of course, was only further proof of American levity and superficiality.

One red-checked, noisy Irishman, started calling me his pet Orangeman, or "Mr. Orange with the Irish soul." I was secretly gratified by this, though somewhat puzzled. It all started when I waited on him and made one of my rather frequent errors, one which he chose to consider as a real joke. The man, who called himself O'Flaherty (a marvellous "American" name which some day I decided I might adopt, if I ever could act American enough) had come in the store one morning and demanded an eye-cup. In all my life I'd never heard of an eye-cup. Undeterred, however, I consulted the store directory, and learned that eye-cups could be found in drawer 67. That drawer, unfortunately, had a variety of articles in it, of which two by some stretch of the imagination could possibly be called cups. One was made of glass, the other of rubber.

Bravely I deposited both on the counter beneath Mr. O'Flaherty's astonished Irish blue eyes, saying crisply: "Well, we have two kinds, rubber and glass, so take your pick. The rubber ones are five, the others ten cents." Whereupon Mr. O'Flaherty burst out in terrific mirth and called upon all the customers in the store to witness my waggishness in trying to sell him a rubber crutch tip as an eye-cup. I decided to join in the ensuing laughter, since it wasn't at my expense. Mr. O'Flaherty, beaming upon me, then invited me to come try his homebrew some day, to get a haircut at his barber-shop, and to try my luck at his pool-room in back of that barber shop. Then, after bestowing upon me a blessing from St. Patrick, he departed still filled with mirth.

Life became more and more exciting, especially on those evenings when I had to work at the soda fountain with the regular soda-jerker. He was Irish too and went to the nearby Roman Catholic high school, but, being a year or so older than I was, he seemed to know all about many exciting sins that I'd never even heard of before. He always dressed very nattily, and frequently gave me his cast-off ties. I had a standing invitation to go out with him some night after store hours in his uncle's Ford, to places where sin was so beautiful and bedizened that I would never again want to go through life innocent.

I had no time for sinning, so I felt pretty safe. I could learn about it second hand, and I could even go on pretending that I was several months older than I was, so that I might seem more desirable to those dazzling girls who already were calling me "blondie," and praising my broad shoulders, and asking me

poutingly where did I get those blue-blue eyes so full of sunshine. Heretofore I'd been rather ashamed of that hair and those eyes, because they made me look so unmistakably Dutch. Suddenly now they were becoming an asset, though I still didn't trust them, and slyly studied the directions on hair dyes, to see if I couldn't make myself darker and more Latin-looking.

Unwittingly I was edging close to sin. So casually that my conscience was still unaware of it, and didn't put up any fight at all. Still, I couldn't help acting puzzled, and skittish. Mr. Baxter, seeing that I was being tempted, would take me aside and preach me a sermon about our bodies being the temples of God. That sounded Calvinistic enough until he put his Flying Roll interpretations to it and began talking about a great era of a thousand years, during which the souls of those who had remained pure on earth would rejoice immaculately in some earthly Eden, and be full of wisdom and power. He also confided in me that he didn't try to instruct the soda clerk in this fashion, because his soul had already fallen from its pristine innocence. This flattered me, but not entirely; somewhere in a remote corner of myself I felt piqued, and just a bit jealous of the soda clerk. Still, for good measure I started acting pretty smug toward him and his suggestions, with the unfortunate result that he withdrew his offer to sell me a pair of very desirable dove-coloured trousers of his for a mere dollar.

All these frivolities came to an abrupt stop when I started going to business school. I made an arrangement with Mr. Baxter, so that I'd be able to work in the store from six-thirty till nine in the morning, for an hour and a half at noon, and then again from four to eleven at night. Golden opportunity had unexpectedly made a pass at me. I might yet, by dint of gruelling work and impossible hours, become a shipping clerk, a bank teller, a book-keeper, who knows, perhaps even a payroll manager. Opportunity told me in a verbose circular, that all this might happen if I only systematized my chaotic mind by assimilating some of the super-promising courses waiting for me at the McLaughlin Business University.

I went back to school, and for the first time to a school in which prayer and religious instruction had no part. To me the teachers seemed strangely worldly, uninspired and unspiritual. I felt that all my fellow students ought to be worthier than I was, even though they didn't give that impression. They looked so comfortably average that I couldn't even feel like an ugly duckling among them.

The tuition fee was steep and my pay at the store barely

covered it, so that soon I would have to find ways of earning more money to add to the family coffers which still needed constant replenishing. My parents had made a great "sacrifice," I knew, in letting me go to business school, especially since it prepared me only for worldly pursuits. Certainly, they said, it was a terrible reflection on American life that there were no Christian business schools which I could attend.

Naturally, by the time I reached school in the morning, I was frequently tired out from the work I'd already done that day, and from my too brief sleeping hours. Yet I plunged into the new work with a real will and excellent intentions. Unfortunately I soon found it completely humdrum and uninspiring, in spite of the frequent pep talks we were subjected to. Then my bodily exhaustion and my lack of all recreation simply put a psychological stop to my good intentions. I couldn't keep up with the work, especially the home-work we were frequently given, and for which I didn't even have a spare minute. My job caused me to arrive at the school fifteen minutes late every morning, so that I missed most of the "Rapid Calculation" hour, and I also missed half an hour at noon dedicated to "Business Spelling and Orthography." Moreover in the afternoon, because I hadn't been able to get permission to leave school early in order to get to the store in time, I had to escape down the fire escape instead of going to the class in "Commercial Law" on the top floor.

At this time I acquired a friend, however, who seemed to hate business school as much as I did, and gladly made his escape with me, even though he had no job he had to hurry to. He would then walk with me to the drugstore, and show in many other ways that he was my friend. I remembered him from our Christian school, where he'd been a grade ahead of me, but where he'd never consciously concerned himself with me. He was a sturdy, clean-thinking youth, much addicted to physical training and to giving me lectures on the body beautiful and perfect muscle co-ordination. He refused to talk about private sins, and he hated all girls, but hated even more the Catholic Church, evidently because priests did unmentionable things to nuns, and *vice versa*. However, when I tried to draw him out on that diverting subject he'd invariably start sputtering inarticulately.

He would take me severely to task for working in a Roman Catholic neighbourhood, for waiting on Roman Catholic customers, and for taking such an interest in the girls who called me "Blondie" when I waited on them at the soda fountain. I in turn, would frequently lead him past the Girls Roman Catholic Seminary, to watch his reactions. Invariably he'd come to a stop

on the sidewalk in front of the main entrance, and, muttering denunciations, would shake his fist at anybody who might be visible on the grounds. I think he was sincerely worried about my being exposed to sin and Catholicism. He tried to talk me into taking "gym," if only I could find even fifteen minutes a day for the physical perfecting of my body, so that thereby my thoughts might become more wholesome too.

I laughed at his concern but his friendliness impressed me. I tried to see more of him Sundays, although I had very little free time even then. However, I had a notion that my parents would disapprove of him for being not at all doctrinally pure, what with his concern over the body beautiful and the conduct of priests and nuns. Besides his parents didn't compel him to go to more than just the two English services on Sunday.

My parents' attitude toward American ways was growing more critical, if anything. Especially now that I was starting to show signs of levity and worldliness; now that instead of acting serious, sedate and oldish, I seemed to be filling my head with silly frippery, and was inclined to be more concerned over the shine of my shoes than the condition of my immortal soul. They suspected that the drugstore was a bad influence upon me, but it brought in money, very badly needed money. Of course, I still attended all the Sunday services without a flaw in my conduct, and if I was showing signs of slackness, they might be attributable to sheer weariness.

Instead of making things easier for me, my parents made them more difficult, of course under the impression that they were doing exactly right. For some time our old eighth grade graduation class had been holding monthly reunions at the houses of various of the alumni. I was invited, but because I worked evenings, I had always declined so far. Then somehow there came an evening, on which I could attend, so I decided that I would. The meeting was going to be held at the house of one of the deacons of our church, so I was quite surprised that my parents protested when I asked them for permission to go. They wanted to know all the reasons for such reunions, and when I could name none that were especially Christian—no Bible discussion, hymn-singing, or prayers—they were suspicious, and just barely gave me their permission.

This was the first time I'd seen my old classmates gathered together again in one place, and everybody seemed fairly happy to see me, though the girls kept their proper distances. On the whole the evening was rather boring, however, and after a few strictly innocent parlour games—which got us no closer to Satan than



they did to God—we had a slice of cake and a cup of hot chocolate, and then our old principal closed the meeting with a prayer. Home we went, all promising that we'd surely see each other again next month.

I reached home before ten o'clock, and without any misgivings. My parents were waiting for me and immediately the questioning started: "What did you do? Who discussed God's Word? Did you read the Bible? Did you conduct yourselves as children of the Covenant?" When I gave a simple résumé of all that had happened, I was severely reprimanded for wanting to attend any such parties, and was forbidden to go to any more.

I was startled, and protested. But since the mere fact that I protested was indicative of my inclination toward evil, I soon realized that it was better to lapse into diplomatic silence. My parents, I knew, were completely unjust, no matter what righteous intentions they had toward me. I also knew that if I had to do any rebelling, I must do it inwardly. I wasn't in the least convinced that I had committed any wrong by gathering with the children of the Christian school which my parents had made me attend because the public schools were so worldly. Still, the mere realization that I was rebelling against my parents disturbed me. However, didn't the Bible also warn parents against provoking their children?

I protested to God in prayer when I reached my bed. I asked for justice and understanding. Then suddenly I realized that as an American I'd already taken a definite step beyond my parents. This also meant that I was one step closer to being an American, which I knew at that moment I wanted to be, no matter what the trouble or expense. I was fifteen, and I reasoned according to my age and understanding. At the drugstore and the business school there was so much to pull me in the wrong direction, but so far I had resisted all that pull. Even though the American-Dutch conduct of life still repelled me, I found it suddenly more just than the extreme dictations of my parents. Suddenly I no longer wondered how it came about that so often young people "lost their reputations" or were supposedly leading "double lives." . . . But that was Satan coming too close to my pillow, whispering to me of things I still didn't want to realize consciously.

## OH, TEMPTATION!

THE JOB I SEEMED TO BE most adept at in the drugstore was window trimming. At least, I satisfied Mr. Baxter's utmost æsthetic desires in that direction, by piling the window full of all sorts of enticing wares, building them into pagodas or Gothic cathedrals, Victorian shrines of Moslem temples.

One afternoon while I was lovingly constructing a fair replica of the Milan Cathedral with boxes of Djer Kiss, Three Flowers, Pomperian Night, La Paloma, Mavis and other aids to female beauty, I found myself gazing into the limpid eyes of a fascinating creature on the other wide of the plate-glass window. This incomparable apparition smiled fully and exclusively at me, flickered amazing eyelashes, parted gorgeous lips, went into motion generally with come-hither undulations from stem to stern, and suddenly pointing to a sign for the new lipstick called Temptation, indicated by touching her heart with her other hand that she was none other than Temptation in the flesh.

The cardboard Temptation, who was a full-blown female with 'cloudy eyes peering through shimmering veils and who had shoulders like the posterior of a pink horse, couldn't compare with her living namesake on the other side of the window. There could be none other as beautiful as she. I wanted to pinch myself: this couldn't really be happening to me, right there over the Djer Kiss spires. But there was no one behind me at whom she could have smiled, and suddenly I was smitten. Inside of me my heart lay in a golden bowl which had a fire beneath it, so that it started to bubble and simmer like a mess of pottage.

I beckoned to her to come in, but coyly she shook her head and all her scrumptious curls, and tragically she pouted. Somehow she managed to convey that she stood in great dread of the old man with that dreadful grey bread who was my boss. She also frowned disdainfully at the soda clerk, who had become aware of her and was now behaving like a cross between a goat and tomcat. She indicated that she wanted me and no one else, and that she'd wait for me even till eternity. But if I could come outside, perhaps to deliver a package, or only briefly to inspect my own window display, she would right then and there put her heart in my hands.

Her name was Ida May, and she lisped o-la-la things in French,

and told me that her last name wasn't important, but that I was to call her Temptation as a seal and bond between us. She even rendered the word in French which made it sound even more luscious. Then she told me in mere everyday English that she attended Central High School, and surely, when she came by in the morning, I would guide her on her perilous journey there, and as reward I could be her champion and slave for evermore.

I knew then that my great moment in life had come. Love had come prancing upon me like a drunken unicorn. So I behaved suitably, in fact in the only way I could behave under such emotional stress. From that day on we walked to school together, and after school we'd meet under the plugged cannon in front of the Kent County Museum, where we vowed frequently that no real cannon would ever be able to wrast us asunder. She was full of mystery and French words, and, it seemed, persecuted by misunderstanding parents who wouldn't allow her to prepare herself for a stage career. Furthermore, she was constantly persecuted by hordes of importunate lovers. Hence she had to be circumspect because I was her only true love and her Hamlet—of whom I'd never heard at the time—even though fate might try to separate us for a while, our love would go on until we died. All that I learned from her in garbled French, English being so vulgar. And wasn't it really hideous that she was of Scotch-Irish extraction? "Isn't it humiliating?" she'd pout.

How could anyone so incomparably beautiful and desirable be wrong in anything? Life suddenly lost its old humdrum aspects, and we two made rendezvous out of every occasion. My friend at the business school, beholding me in the throes of such an extravagant romance, simply gave me up, after cursing all females roundly, and threatening to bomb all the Roman Catholic churches in town, no matter how much I tried to convince him that my Ida May Temptation was no Catholic at all. Only a Catholic could behave so treacherously, gaudily and destructively, he shouted.

These soul-shaking frivolities continued unabated for four or five weeks. Naturally all my work, and even my health suffered. The soda clerk, wild with jealousy, was full both of gloomy warnings and of scorn. "Temptation" only appeared in the store when I was there alone, preferably when I could seat her at the soda fountain and ply her lovely palate with the most amazing concoctions I could whip into shape with ice cream, assorted syrups, nuts and cherries. Then she called me something wonderful which later turned out to be simply "Blue-Eyes" in her own brand of embroidered French.

All this would never do, the soda fountain clerk told me. Because, unlike him, I wasn't even a man yet, and some day this bewitching creature would demand of me the supreme sacrifice that any man could make to any woman, and I would be unprepared. I would fumble and blunder and our lovely romance would be ruined. It was therefore high time that he taught me the facts of life, so that I might become *saue* and nonchalant about such matters, instead of acting like a romantic bull calf with yellow hair, pimples and outmoded clothes.

The opportunity for emerging from that cocoon of innocence which enveloped me so disgracefully soon presented itself. Of course, I would have to be unfaithful to Ida May Temptation just once, but that would be all the better in the end. The opportunity generously presented itself as twofold, in the persons of two tarts who wanted to buy new lipsticks. Of course I didn't even show them the brand called Temptation. Oh, no, I never would let that sacred name be sullied. However, they finally chose another kind with which they made the gashes which represented their mouths even more lurid and bloody-looking. Brazenly they wafted terrifically heady perfumes toward me, and showed their age and their ageless experience in all their features, words and gestures. I was waiting on them, and they were giving me the once-over. I had broad shoulders, I looked older than my years, and the white store coat hid my poverty. They were starting to make remarks to me which could lead to only one thing. So I called the soda clerk over to be my mentor, and the outcome of it was that that very evening after eleven o'clock we were to descend to the basement rooms of these ladies of the evening, and there I would bid my childhood innocence good-bye for ever.

It was all pretty awful. Privately I calculated that these fallen women had at least reached the advanced age of twenty, and that certainly I would become diseased forever, and that perhaps I'd never dare to look my mother in the face again. What was worse, Brick, the soda-fountain clerk, didn't seem to be his usual boastful self either. As the day progressed, he became increasingly quiet and preoccupied. Once he consulted me *sotto voce* as to what I thought was the right sum of money we should pay the women for their services, and were we to pay it when we left or when we came in, and should we put in in their hands, or leave it on the mantel? Naturally, I couldn't advise him. He was the man of the world, and I was merely the innocent victim, the clay that still had to be moulded, the vessel still to be tested by fire.

Still later Brick came to me rather abjectly, with shame so

obvious upon him that it might well have been represented by insignia on his jacket. He confessed that, in spite of all his boasting, he himself was as virginal as I was. Of course, he'd kissed nice girls, but to take this drastic step . . . well, it seemed too drastic that was all there was to it. But what were we to do? Of course, we argued, we couldn't back out now. That would be neither honourable, gentlemanly, nor even manly. We had set the ball a-rolling and now we must keep going, or our humiliation might last for ever and some day we might become like those slinky, skulking men who frequented public comfort stations. Certainly our time was here, and if we fled from it now, we'd have to play the penalty for ever.

At that point one of us remembered having heard somewhere that in the army soldiers were fed doses of saltpetre when their morals were likely to be endangered. Surely if Uncle Sam (and Brick should know, as he was an American citizen, which I wasn't) could take measures like that, it would be equally manly for us to do likewise. I started hunting for the powdered saltpetre immediately, and Brick mixed two chocolate sodas into which we shook enormous portions of the saltpetre. Quickly we consumed the sodas and started watching each other warily for results. None came. An hour later we thought it advisable to have another soda and increase the dose of saltpetre, and lo and behold, a few minutes later I felt the first twitches of pain in my stomach. These soon increased in intensity so that before long I was shivering and aching from head to foot. I grinned victoriously at Brick, while he waited for his own reaction to set in.

That came much later, obviously because his constitution was hardier than mine. But now it was ten o'clock, and still an hour till closing time, so we decided to have another doctored-up chocolate soda. This time my aches were so magnificent that the hairs seemed to be popping out of my head like tiny field mice. After a while, Brick, too, started doubling over with pain. His being sixteen and more sophisticated certainly seemed to give him an advantage over pain. However, he insisted that it was the fish he'd eaten that day, it being Friday.

At the fated hour of eleven we left the store, and doubled up with pain we directed our steps to the girls' basement apartment. In fact our aches became so great that we made a beeline for our destination, instead of lingering with any further doubts and misgivings. Besides, we didn't quite know when the effects of the saltpetre might start wearing off, to leave us vulnerable again. The two females received us somewhat in undress, in feather-trimmed kimonos; they were actually smoking cigarettes—the

first women I'd seen do so—and immediately seemed intent on removing our clothes, only realizing then that we were in distress. And no wonder. At that point I felt as if my eyeballs were going to pop out of my head and roll across the carpet like glass balls. Immediately the girls decided that we must have eaten something that didn't agree with us, and that if we were going to be sick, we'd better be sick on the street. Besides, they said it would be much better for us to go home to our mamas.

We had been saved, and our integrity was still intact. The pains from the saltpetre lasted for forty-eight hours, but they were worth it. Besides, Ida May Temptation was all mine, more fully so now that I'd made such a great sacrifice for her, and now I no longer had to listen to Brick's lectures on the course of true love and the probable demands of your best girl.

It was now February, however, and the first term of high school was ending, and though it was obvious even to me that my Temptation must be fairly slaying her French teacher with her super-excellent French, it seemed that her other teachers saw little reason for her to continue school at all. So she was going to be subjected to the humiliation of looking for a job, and perhaps our romance would now be shattered like a five-and-dime-store tumbler. Perhaps it might soon become necessary for us to start considering a suicide pact, before life's grim realities encroached upon us still further. Then suddenly one evening she told me that she was going to visit her grandmother in Kalamazoo for a month, but that she, of course, would remain faithful to me, and that she knew I would to her.

By this time my work at the business school had suffered considerably. I had by now lost all interest in it, and was frequently disciplined for cutting classes. Furthermore, the book-keeping teacher had already told me that I could never hope to become a businessman unless I started showing more respect for my double-entry book-keeping. Even with Ida May gone, I simply didn't have the time to do justice to my school-work, especially since the home-work had been increasing steadily. For a whole week I tried to cut my sleep down to four hours, so that I could devote an extra hour after midnight to my studies. It was a physical impossibility.

New and more serious temptations started besetting me at the store. To it often came a venereally diseased young fellow, who had been kicked out of Catholic High because of his bad conduct. He would sit around in the store, and confide in me about the ravages of his disease, and then ask me to sell him all manner of preparations which could quickly get him back into shape again.

I was horrified and fascinated, but also honoured because he confided in me.

Then one evening I learned that the stout, high-breasted, peroxide-haired woman who had been making goo-goo eyes at me over her inevitable pineapple sodas was this young fellow's mother. They came upon each other in the store that evening, they fought, and they snarled at each other, but she stood her ground, while he slunk out into the night. The woman now had tears welling up in her blue eyes, and grabbing my hands, she cried: "Oh what a sorrow he is to me. You don't know; you can't possibly understand, because you're such a sweet blue-eyed lad. If only I had a son like you. . . ."

Never before had I encountered such tragedy in the raw, and all the things I knew about the son made me feel very mournful and sympathetic toward this disconcertingly voluptuous Mrs. K. She, however, soon sat down to eat her pineapple soda in order to compose herself. "Put in an extra scoop of ice cream, darling," she murmured to me. "That's the sweet boy. Oh, I feel as if I could die. . . ." Then when there were no other customers left in the store, she took my hand and insisted that I feel the awful beating of her heart, somewhere among those high-tiled breasts that heaved up and down like rowboats on a choppy sea. "Oh, if I had a sweet, sweet son like you," she murmured. "Oh dear, I mustn't, I mustn't," because a customer came in, and she started powdering her face with Pompeian Night in the mirror of the soda fountain. And then she left without paying for her soda, and I didn't have the spirit to call her back.

That was the beginning. After that she persisted in coming into the store when she knew I was at the fountain alone. She would frequently rake her fingers through my blond hair, while she shed occasional tears and heaved her breasts emotionally. She even told me she would like to rock me in her lap, and just cry and cry and let me kiss her tears dry. This was almost too much, I decided, but I refused to believe that her caresses were in any way wrong. She only behaved this way with me because her only son was such a disappointment to her. And, of course, she was just being American.

Soon she also told me that she was often very lonely, and that her husband had left her for a silly wide-eyed floosie years ago. And where did I live, and which way did I walk home? Oh, why then I could walk right by her house if I only turned two blocks to the right off Wealthy Street, and surely I would stop in some evening—oh it didn't matter how late, she was always alone, and couldn't sleep, anyway—and have a cup of hot chocolate with

her, because I was such a blue-eyed golden-haired dear. . . .

She was brimming over with sentiment, and had me brimming over with compassion. But I didn't dare to go to her house until one evening Mr. Baxter asked me to deliver a package there on my way home. This then was her summons, and it was my duty to cheer her lonely hearth for a little while. Mrs. K. met me at the door with dramatic gestures, and planting a kiss upon my lips, said that her house was so dark because her good-for-nothing son was lying in a drunken stupor in bed upstairs, and she simply had to talk to me. She made me lie down on a couch in a dim sort of alcove, because she said, her blue-eyed boy looked so tired. Then she started patting my stomach and stroking my cheeks, and asking me if I had started to shave yet, and where did I get those husky shoulders, and saying that I certainly must have dates with many girls, nice girls, of course, who administered to all my wants.

When I valiantly denied that I had girls, she started to ask many questions about my love life, much as Brick had done, but in a motherly fashion. She soon came to the decision that I was a great big beautiful innocent boy, and that I must never allow any dirty-minded girl to take that away from me, but if she could help me in any way . . . because that might be so much better, and perhaps I'd better start taking off my coat. . . . Suddenly I found myself fleeing from her house, almost leaving my coat behind; wildly I went clumping down her porch and ran halfway to the humble and austere precincts of home before I came to a stop. Like Joseph I had fled in the nick of time from the wiles of Potiphar's wife. I was horrified. Suddenly I burst into tears. But now I didn't want to go home. There beneath the bare maples, I decided that there must be such evil lust evident upon my countenance that I simply attracted evil, and that I was to blame for everything. Certainly I'd better do something soon about those pimples and blackheads which were starting to mar my otherwise clear complexion, because they might give such foul women notions about me. Besides, weren't they outward evidences of filthy thoughts and practices?

I was sure that Mrs. K. would never come back to the drug-store, and if she did, I thought I would have to hide myself in the basement. But she came in one evening while Mr. Baxter was there, and she smiled at me forgivingly, as if she was quite willing to overlook my defection. She manoeuvred to pay me in person for a magazine she was buying, and only murmured: "Oh you poor, poor darling."

Several evenings later, Mr. Baxter told me that once again I had



to deliver a package to Mrs. K. and that this time I would have to take along change for five dollars, as she wanted to pay for the package at the door. I started trembling so violently that I couldn't answer him. Immediately he guided me to the back of the store, behind the prescription counter, and there I poured out all my anguish, the awful story of my temptations in connection with the dangerous Mrs. K. He shook his old head and muttered that I should be strong, and that like a knight armoured with faith, I should face her, but refuse her advances, so that thereby I might become stronger and cleaner. Above all, I shouldn't give offence to Mrs. K. because she was such a good customer, though she might be in error morally.

I promised I would try. That I would gird my youth and innocence with faith. But when I approached Mrs. K.'s house, and saw her silhouetted against the window, all my firm resolutions left me. I leaped up the porch steps, deposited the package in front of the door, and just as the door started opening, I jumped down the porch again and ran away. Naturally, I had to tell Mr. Baxter what I had done. He smiled at me patiently, and said that some day he hoped that I would be strong enough, but that after this Brick had better deliver all orders to Mrs. K.

From that day on, however, just before I left the store at eleven in the evening, I would go down into the grimy basement, and apply there a heavy coat of Mr. Baxter's own incomparable pimple and blackhead cream. Then with my face covered with the ghastly, pink, semi-luminous, rapidly hardening cream, I would slink the two miles homeward by back alleys and byways. Anyone who might have met me would have taken me for a leper in the final stages of decomposition. Then I'd slip into the dark house and go to bed, always trying to wake up an hour later, so that I could removed the pimple cream. I could never afford to let my parents catch me thus bedizened. Never would I be able to explain, no matter how worthy my motives really were. Still I was grimly determined to look like a wholesome, unblemished American youth in whom the Mrs. K's. of the world would see no lust and find no delight.

## DAVID DE YOUNG, AMERICAN

THE OLD ROUTINE DAYS went on, with Mrs. K. laying new snares, her son ripening with old diseases, and with Ida May Temptation still in Kalamazoo. In spite of her promises, she'd never written me a single letter. I kept hoping for one until I recalled that in the sublime ardour of our courtship we had never even learned each other's last names. My face was even more blemished than before, and the situation between me and the business univeristy was coming to a head.

I was now hopelessly behind in my work. Even my fiend, who had accepted me again when my Temptation went to Kalamazoo, could do little to disentangle me from my hopeless difficulties. I saw the blank wall ahead, but I couldn't conceive of any way by which I could prevent coming into collision with it. Suddenly, however, I did something desperate, which changed the entire course of events.

In one of the mysterious indexed drawers at the store I discovered a paper puncher which left a cloverleaf-shaped hole like the one my bookkeeping teacher used to mark our progress through the various stages of double-entry bookkeeping. By this time I was approximately twenty punches behind. So here was either a short cut to achievement or one sure step toward ruin. I was willing to take a chance, got my card, and punched twenty neat holes down the margin, only stopping just before the quarterly oral and written examinations. I realized, of course, that I would never dare to present myself with the card at the examination. Not unless something cataclysmic had happened to all the teachers involved, or unless in the meanwhile I could cram myself so full of bookkeeping lore, up to the date so definitely set by my own puncher, that none of the teachers would see anything suspicious in my sudden progress. After desperately wavering back and forth between these two alternatives for some days, I came to the realization that I had brought myself face to face with a crisis which I couldn't surmount. I couldn't even keep going to school without being caught.

My despair rode high. It was early spring and the ice jams in the Grand River were breaking, and dismally I'd stand on the bridge watching the blasting, while I was supposed to be at

school. When the school hours were over I'd simply return to the drugstore. Then one evening when I arrived home as usual just before midnight, I found my young brother Meindert waiting for me with some bad news. This was in return for services rendered, he gave me to understand, because I had helped him out of so many scrapes. It seemed that during the day one of the school officials had presented himself at our door and informed our mother, who still would have no truck with English, that for several days I hadn't been to classes, and surely I was either sick or playing hooky.

Mother didn't understand a word of it and called Meindert to the door, who decided promptly that he'd better act as stupid as possible to cope with this dangerous situation. As a matter of fact, he'd never heard of the word "hooky" before, but he had a fair idea of what was at stake. He told my mother that the irate gentleman before her was accusing me of playing some fancy game, something similar to hockey, which was what it sounded like, and that the gentleman was displeased by such conduct on my part. Naturally, Mother thereupon rose up in great wrath and told my brother in no uncertain Dutch that I was a most serious and hard-working young man, who wasn't given to playing any silly American games or she would know about it, and that if the gentleman on the porch really wanted to know where I frittered away my time, he had better march straight to the drugstore to gaze upon me in honest labour. She ordered Meindert to translate what she had said to the presumptuous man there before her. Meindert had done his best, without saying anything about the drugstore, however, since he surmised that I might be in deep enough water already without being confronted there by this obviously hostile official. The latter had then departed, muttering to himself about the stupidity and stubbornness of all the Dutch.

Now I knew that something had to be done, and by me alone. The next morning, Mother, still in a great state of excitement, asked me point-blank whether I was a hockey or hooky player. I finally convinced her that I knew nothing about any such game. However I immediately started reading the Help Wanted columns, knowing that my school would certainly never recommend me for any job and that I'd better start recommending myself.

I had received more than an inkling as to how that could be accomplished from lectures on "Selling Yourself," "Business Personality" and "How to Charm Your Prospective Employer." It seemed that you not only put your best foot forward, but also

your most complete brazenness as well. You simply put your humility and your conscience in cold storage, in order to convince your victim that you were the most efficient person on earth and accordingly could demand the highest salary at the best possible terms. If you did this, your prospective employer would not only hire you on the spot, but he'd be filled with such respect for you that he'd immediately invite you to his country club to play a few holes of golf. I somewhat dreaded the latter, as I hadn't the slightest idea how golf was played, but I was prepared to face that issue when I came to it. Also I was quite convinced that even if ninety per cent. of the school's graduates might get away with such behaviour, I would surely fail at it. I only had to look at my unprepossessing, downy face, my shabby clothes and my ungainly bearing to be convinced of this.

Still, I culled three possibilities from out of the newspaper, and after my early morning hours at the drugstore, I started out with a freshly washed face, a borrowed tie and with my suit sponged clean of its worst spots with Energine. At the Lamoraux Bean Company I got nowhere at all. At the next concern the bullet-headed gentleman who questioned me nearly had a fit when I told him that I would consider starting at thirty a week, but hardly at less. He immediately showed me the nearest door out, but said that if I wanted to reconsider and work for ten dollars a week I might humbly ask him for another interview. At a wholesale fruit importing house I might have become a shipping clerk if I had proved myself superior to thirty other applicants, and if I had considered carting crates of fruits and handling bunches of bananas as not beneath my dignity.

Two other days I wasted in similar fashion. Then one evening I read in the newspaper that a local bank wanted a clean, efficient Christian boy who was willing to work hard for advancement. One could write a letter to a certain box number to express one's willingness. Certainly I was Christian, and I looked reasonably clean, and it was really up to the bank to discover how efficient I was, I decided. When I got home from work after midnight, I sat down and wrote a letter, using one of the forms suggested in a book on business correspondence. The next morning, however, on the way to the drugstore I decided to go the bank one better and apply for the job in person as well as dropping my letter in a mailbox. So at nine I presented my cleanly scrubbed Christian self at the bank for inspection.

Needless to say, I was very little acquainted with the city's financial institutions. By the time I reached downtown I wasn't quite certain whether it was the Grand Rapids Savings Bank or

the Grand Rapids National Bank that I had applied to. The former was the first one I saw, however, so I entered its Gothic doors with the first depositors.

A bank guard told me to talk to a pleasant, florid, but rather weary-looking gentleman who was sitting behind a little marble fence. This man inclined his head gently toward me while I explained that I had decided to present myself in person instead of by letter, and that I was Christian and clean, and that for some months I had devoted myself to bookkeeping at a worthy business university.

The good man gave me a long-suffering smile. Yes, he said, I did look like a clean lad, and no doubt I was Christian if I said so, and surely I must be both ambitious and efficient to present myself thus unexpectedly. However, the trouble was his bank hadn't yet made up its mind to ask for a clean, efficient Christian young man, though they had contemplated doing so next month. Surely however, now that I was there, I was really saving them a lot of trouble and perhaps money. Considering what a great institution this bank was, how would I like the honour of starting to work in it from the bottom up? And how old was I, and was I a thrifty young man?

Boldly I added a good year and a half to my callow years, and confessed that I might be one of the greatest savers of this generation, but that I'd never had a chance to find out for myself. My heart was pounding; surely soon he'd ask for a recommendation from my school, or he'd lift the receiver from his telephone to call the school in person. But he merely kept bobbing his head benevolently, and then started telling me in the most tantalizingly gradual fashion just what would be expected of me. Even more gradually it became apparent that I was hired, and that he wasn't going to concern himself in the least with any blemishes that might be on my record. I'd receive the munificent salary of forty dollars a month, but just think of the honour of working for this great institution!

The meagre salary disappointed me. But he hadn't even given me a chance to sell myself for anything larger. Besides, he already was acting as if he'd bestowed upon me the paternal blessing of the bank itself and it wouldn't be right to scorn that. I accepted, and immediately began to worry about something else. Could I perhaps change my name, so that the business school wouldn't find out where I was and take my job away from me?

I decided that I looked and could act the age I had told him. It might, however, be criminal to change my name. Still, when the gentleman asked me for my name, I boldly spelled it David

De Young. The humble Dutch DeJong would never do for the august goal I now had set before me, not now that I was well on the way to becoming a financial tycoon. I had a bit of difficulty figuring out the new, assumed date of my birth, but finally managed. And then, for the first time in my life, I was ashamed that I had to explain that I had been born in the Netherlands, in a small place called Blija. . . .

I had become an American, I told myself. Perhaps even an American of the calibre of those Dutch Americans who had treated us so meanly. But, I consoled myself, I was doing so for a real cause, an American cause. My chief sensation, of course, was one of excitement, almost of giddiness, at having outwitted the business school by getting a job for myself, just when everything seemed at its most impossible.

Cockily I strode out of that bank, and further down the street I gazed scornfully upon the Grand Rapids National Bank which would have to get along without my talents, as its minions might come to find out after they'd read my letter of application, which I had posted in the wee morning hours of this very day.

So there was nothing to do now but report my victory at home. Nothing really to do but turn over my new salary of almost ten dollars a week to the family budget. For consolation, I told myself that there would be no more working hours from six in the morning until midnight. From now on I would have easy sledding in the American fashion. It only depended on so much bluff and so much additional self-confidence, on a change of name and a change of attitude. Perhaps soon now I would be able to buy a new suit of clothes befitting my position and assumed age.

But then worries started to nag at me unmercifully. Was less than ten dollars a week sufficient, even to keep me barely happy and slightly free? Wouldn't it be better to keep working at the drugstore—where work seemed greater freedom than so-called leisure at home—before and after bank hours? Didn't I already know that according to old family custom—oh, no wild American ways would ever change my parent's attitude in that respect—I wouldn't be allowed to keep any of my earnings except perhaps fifty cents a week. This state of affairs would continue until the year before I got married, when I'd be permitted to keep the sum total of my earnings to get my own snug household started. The prospect seemed decidedly unfair now that I personally was confronted with it. It was not the American way, I told myself rather defiantly. But only I myself could work out my own salvation, in my own way. So then it might be better to hold on to

the drugstore job as well as the new job at the bank. Suddenly it seemed practically a necessity, now that my first elation had left me and was merely keeping pace with me like a shadow.

I kept walking. I kept worrying, and holding a sort of petulant argumentation with my inmost doubts. Now that I had practically jimmied myself into the American white-collar pattern of life, wasn't it time to start forgetting those ambitions which I had conceived, nursed, developed and even frequently disowned during these first years in America? Or was it perhaps better to examine those ambitions to see if they were made of the stuff that could materialize into real substance? Or had I ever had any real right to have any ambitions at all, considering the fact that those ambitions necessarily had to be based on misunderstandings, uncertainties, daydreams and vague second-hand ideals? It seemed so important to know the answers, but also so awfully difficult to shape the questions. I was simply too young. I was barely sixteen, that excruciatingly unhappy age when sanity and insanity mingled equally and upset all your intentions, meanings, senses and sensibilities.

So actually, even when faced with my own particular problem, how could I settle it at sixteen? How could I even make myself aim in any direction that seemed potentially worth while? One simply can't do it at that coltish age. Concretely, I would now start earning a small salary without jeopardizing the safety of my tidy existence. At home I would remain subject to the same rules and strictures as before. For a little while I might feel some pride. To hold on to that pride, I would have to start girding myself about with all sorts of artificial standards of behaviour, all kinds of dangerously unstable measures of conduct. I only sensed these things remotely. I was being vexed by something terribly indefinite, something that only agitated the outmost fringes of my mind. Subconsciously, while I was groping after these thoughts, I had turned my steps in the direction of the river. Now I found myself standing on the wind-swept bridge again, looking down once more upon the breaking up of the ice jams below. Somehow, however, the blasts of dynamite now had something triumphant in them; they no longer left faintly thudding echoes of despair, as they had done yesterday and the day before.

Nothing then should matter but the immediate. Maybe it was even better not to realize what had brought me back to this bridge. Had I actually come here to perceive something because at no other place could I see it clearly enough to thrash it out with questions and answers? Shouldn't I at least try to formulate those questions and answers, and stop myself from groping along in

their mere shadows? Should I, or was bewilderment better and more expedient?

Beneath me churned the green-brown river, frothing and eddying angrily against the ice that was trying to restrain it. It was the same river we children had looked at soon after we'd come to America expecting to find in it something that would comfort us by reminding us of Holland. But the river hadn't done that. Neither had it been a contradiction of Dutch things, nor a repudiation, nor an exaggeration nor belittling. It had simply been totally disinterested in our expectations, in its own oblivious and private way. We had been disappointed in it and had refused to accept it as a real river, or even as a real aspect of America. But that was simply due to our wilfulness and ignorance, or perhaps even more to our innocence. Here was the river again flowing beneath me, and even though jammed with ice and turbulent, it was now familiar. I no longer had any need to find that it resembled anything in Holland, no necessity to conjure up by it any sort of hopes, yearnings or nostalgia.

I was leaning upon the cold parapet when suddenly I realized that an incredibly filthy old man had come to a stop beside me. He wasn't looking at the blasting in the river, but gradually had turned his mottled, wrinkled face toward me and was now waiting for me to look at him directly. His face was festooned ignobly with shreds of tobacco, crumbs, spittle and scales of peeling skin. When he saw my eyes fixed upon it, his brown lips along his stained loose teeth started wheedling: "Hey, straw-top, you'n me's Dutchmen, I know. How about doin' a fellow Dutchman a good turn. How about a nickel, what d'ye say, Whitie?" and he looked with feigned anguish at the river and spat into it before he repeated: "What d'ye say, Whitie?"

So he wasn't aware that he was addressing himself to David C. De Young, a young ambitious American. Even he could make me feel suddenly deflated. Even from him I couldn't hide that I was an insignificant young Dutch-American alien.

I shook my head and tapped my coat pockets in which there wasn't even a nickel for myself. Should I have merely shrugged my shoulders disdainfully and looked away? Wouldn't that have been so much more American, or at least more Dutch-American? I said gravely with my very noticeable Dutch accent: "Sorry, but honest I haven't got a cent on me."

He leered fatuously. He sidled five paces away and stopped to spit into the river again, and to say: "Damned smug Dutchman. They're all alike." He stood there now looking at me defiantly, and I found myself hurrying off that bridge toward downtown



again, saying to myself almost violently: But I am becoming an American. And America has already become much more important to me than Holland. And making my way in America is much better and much more necessary to me than turning back to Holland.

Saying further to myself: And I am still young enough to grow into it. Even though now I can't possibly see any ambitions or any future ahead of me except a mere enlargement or intensification of what I already have.

That is, I was groping anxiously to express those things to myself. In reality I was still even too Dutch to understand that only another Dutchman could have spotted me as Dutch and humiliated me by so doing. But I was also already American enough to have been rankled by the fact that I had been recognized as a Dutchman. For the time being it seemed that my ambitions had to be directed along the same lines as those of other Dutch Americans. I had to make special efforts to erase my Dutchness and make myself completely nondescript; I had to find the exact, unspectacular, opaque core of American life and hide myself in it. And that in spite of the fact that I didn't want to be a Dutch American like those I saw around me. However time, events, my education, and my economic and social circumstances did not afford me with any alternative.

I strode past the bank again. Next week I'd be working there. I looked at its glistening granite pillars without any pride now. Instead I had a premonition that everything was closing in upon me and pushing me into a corner where I would have no choice of my own. It seemed almost humiliating to me now that I was on my way home to announce to my parents my so-called triumph of getting that bank job; to my mother who didn't want to see me become American in any way, to my father who would take no pride in the fact that I would be a white-collar worker in an American bank. I was now returning to my own peculiarly restricted environment, where I wouldn't even dare to study any of my new reactions, what with God, my family and my own conscience all watching me over my shoulder.

I had put the downtown district behind me. I started whistling defiantly as I hurried along beneath the scrambled hieroglyphics of the barren branches against the bleak page of sky. It seemed that I was whistling something like this to myself: there is nothing for you to do but to take each day as it comes, and to accept from it the occasional shred, mote, pebble, grain or tatter that you dare to claim as especially your own. Now you are too young, too callow, too weak, poor and alien to do anything more.

I continued my way whistling beneath those trees and that bleak sky, past those American houses on that American street. And then I realized only one thing concretely, unmistakably: I didn't want to be walking anywhere else. And that realization was strong and positive enough to keep me whistling, but no longer defiantly.

